

Alberta Conservation Association 2015/16 Program Summary Report

Project Name: Provincial Habitat Securement Program

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Leader: Ed Kolodychuk

Primary ACA staff on project:

Debora Dueck, Marco Fontana, Kevin Gardiner, Tyler Johns, Ed Kolodychuk,
Roy Schmelzeisen, Lenore Stone, Brad Taylor, Juanna Thompson and Erin Vandermaarel

Partnerships

Alberta Fish & Game Association
Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk
Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Chinook Chapters

Key Findings

- We secured one new Conservation Site and expanded one other site, totaling 453.5 ac (183.5 ha), in 2015/16.
- The two acquisitions included 133.5 ac (54.0 ha) of riparian and upland habitat on the Raven River and 320 ac (129.5 ha) of riparian and native grassland habitat.
- The Silver Sage Conservation Site expanded in size to 2,371 ac (959.5 ha).
- The estimated land value of the secured lands is approximately \$758,000.

Introduction

Alberta's population reached four million in 2013, the largest census gain on record, and continued to steadily increase in 2015. Alberta is forecast to overtake British Columbia as the third-largest populous province after Ontario and Quebec. Alberta's natural land base is under intense pressure from a variety of sources, including agricultural, municipal and industrial development, in relation to its population growth. As the population has increased, urban areas have expanded, contributing to ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation. This trend will likely continue as Alberta's population increases and demand for land continues.

Alberta Conservation Association's (ACA) Habitat Securement Fund (HSF) provides ACA with opportunities to secure, protect and enhance wildlife and fish habitat, as well as to enhance sustainable recreational opportunities for Albertans. We work with a variety of conservation groups, government agencies, industries and other partners to slow this declining habitat trend by securing priority habitat across Alberta.

We used a provincially standardized, geographic information system–based approach to identify 28 priority focus areas throughout Alberta that contain valuable wildlife and fish habitat (Figure 1 and Table 1). Focus areas assist our securement efforts and identify areas of overlap with other conservation groups and partners to expand financial partnership opportunities. In 2015, we drafted Habitat Securement Program Guidelines, which provide methods and processes endorsed by ACA to help guide fund administration and securement activities.

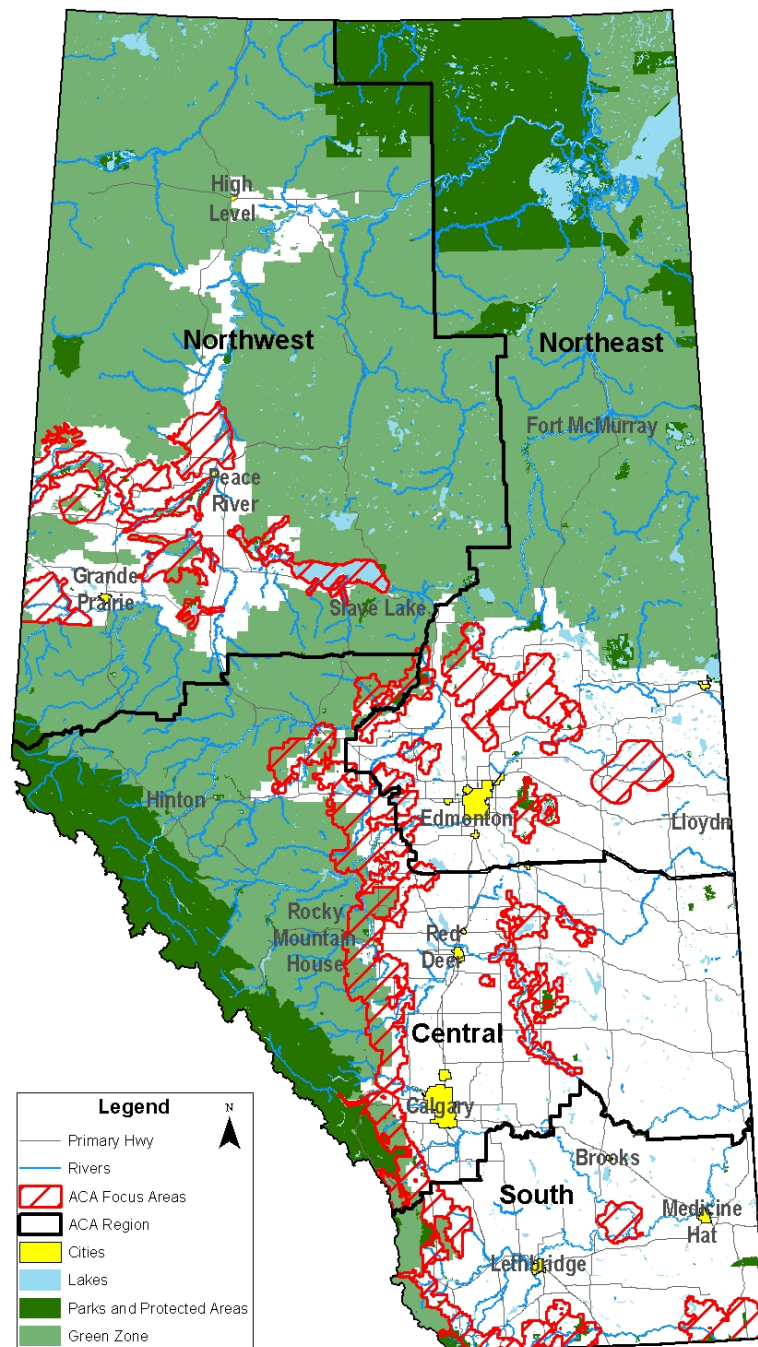


Figure 1. Alberta Conservation Association’s 28 focus areas across Alberta.

Table 1. Focus areas in each Alberta Conservation Association region.

ACA region	Focus area
Central	Battle River
	Bow Valley/Highwood River Drainage
	Buffalo Lake Moraine
	Foothills Corridor
	McLeod River
	Pine Lake Moraine
	Red Deer River
	Rumsey Moraine
	North Saskatchewan/Pembina River
Northeast	Beaverhills
	Lac La Nonne
	Athabasca/Hubert Lake
	Tawatinaw
	Therien
Northwest	Beaverlodge/Redwillow
	Deadwood
	Fairview
	Kimiwan/Winagami/Lesser Slave Lake
	Smoky
	Smoky/Peace Point
	Sturgeon Lake
Southern	West Dunvegan
	Crowsnest Pass
	Front Ranges
	Hays
	Milk River Ridge
	Porcupine Hills
	Sage Creek

As important habitats become available within focus areas, we and our partners (both corporate sponsors and other conservation agencies) collaborate to secure these important habitats. Lands that are acquired are referred to as Conservation Sites and provide Albertans with year-round

sustainable recreational opportunities. We advertise ACA and partner-owned Conservation Sites on our website and in our *Discover Alberta's Wild Side: Annual Outdoor Adventure Guide*.

Methods

We secure lands primarily through fee-simple purchase, land donations, and dispositions for Crown lands. Priority habitat on freehold and Crown land may be obtained through any one (or a combination of) these methods. The following steps outline the process Land Management Program staff use to secure lands through the HSF:

- Initial assessment of property.
 - Determine if property is within our conservation priorities for land securement. If property is not of interest to ACA, advise the landowner and refer the landowner to other possible conservation organizations.
- Initial meeting with landowner.
 - Preliminary discussion of landowner's desire for the property; preliminary walk of the property and assessment of resources, liabilities, hazardous waste, etc.; photograph the property; landowner expresses an interest in selling the property.
 - Complete a Habitat Assessment – Initial Site Inspection Form.
- Obtain the legal land title of the property.
 - Confirm ownership and identify encumbrances or other interests registered against title (e.g., mortgages, liens, rights-of-way, zoning).
- Complete an environmental assessment (includes both an environmental enforcement search from the Environmental Law Centre and historical title search from Land Titles).
- Contract an appraisal.
- Complete land acquisition (HSF) proposal.
 - Include the following attachments: legal land title, air photo, photographs, environmental assessment and appraisal.
- Send land acquisition (HSF) proposal to the Land Management Program manager for review and distribution to the Land Management team.
 - Land Management team ranks proposal (criteria regarding Conservation & Recreational Value); reviewer provides comments and recommendation.
- Land Management Program manager prepares summary of rankings and provides a recommendation to the President and CEO for review and submission to ACA's Board.
- If the proposal is approved by the Board, an offer to purchase is prepared and reviewed by ACA's legal counsel and then presented to the landowner.
- If the offer to purchase is accepted, the necessary legal documents (e.g., Dower Affidavit,

Affidavit of Execution) for transfer of land to ACA is prepared by ACA's legal counsel and forwarded to the landowner or his or her representative for execution.

- ACA's legal counsel registers all necessary legal documents at the Land Titles Office.
- Review the acquisition checklist and confirm that all items have been sent to ACA's corporate office.
- Update the land securement database to reflect the new project.
- Upload the new Conservation Site to ACA's website and advertise it in the next edition of our *Discover Alberta's Wild Side: Annual Outdoor Adventure Guide*.

We also collaborate with other conservation groups, such as Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA), Ducks Unlimited Canada, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Pheasants Forever and Trout Unlimited Canada as part of the above process to secure partnership funding and additional benefits, including cost-shared management and maintenance of the Conservation Sites.

The Habitat Securement Program's budget includes staff time to complete land acquisitions and funds for associated expenses, including appraisals, surveys, legal fees, title transfers, instrument registrations, and file management for legal documents and management plans for each Conservation Site. In addition, municipal property taxes for ACA Conservation Sites are included in the Habitat Securement Program's budget.

Results

In 2015/16, we acquired two new Conservation Sites, involving two fee-simple land purchases (Drake and Silver Sage – expansion) (Table 2). We conserved 133.5 ac (54.0 ha) of dry mixedwood habitat and 320 ac (129.5 ha) of dry mixedgrass habitat. The Silver Sage expansion acquisition increased the Silver Sage Conservation Site to 2,371 ac (959.5 ha). Collaborative partnerships with landowners, conservation groups and other organizations contribute significantly to our success in conserving habitat. Funding partnerships allow ACA to actively pursue additional securement opportunities that might otherwise be deferred or even lost because of time restrictions.

In total, we conserved 453.5 ac (183.5 ha) of habitat across the province with an estimated land value of \$758,000. This habitat will be managed to benefit a variety of wildlife and fish species and to provide sustainable recreational opportunities to Albertans.

Table 2. Habitat Securement Program acquisitions in 2015/16.

Region and project name	Securement tool and partners	Size (acres)	Special features
Central			
Drake Pt. SE-17-036-04-W5M	A collaborative acquisition between ACA and the Provincial Court of Alberta	133.5	This site is located on the Raven River approximately 50 km southeast of Rocky Mountain House. It occurs in dry mixedwood habitat and contains valuable riparian and instream fish habitat because the river meanders through this site. The river supports angling opportunities for brook and brown trout. This unique site provides fish spawning habitat and supports a variety of other wildlife, including deer, elk, moose, black bear, ruffed grouse and waterfowl.
Southern			
Silver Sage (Expansion) SW-09-004-05-W4M SE-09-004-05-W4M	A collaborative acquisition between ACA, AFGA, Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk, and Pheasants Forever – Calgary and Chinook Chapters	320	This site is located approximately 18 km south of Manyberries. It expands the Silver Sage Conservation Site to 2,371 ac and creates greater connectivity across the landscape. Ketchum Creek flows through a portion of this site. Native grassland restoration activities are planned to improve habitat diversity for wildlife. Wildlife found here and in the immediate area include pronghorn, sharp-tailed grouse, and sensitive species such as ferruginous hawk, Sprague's pipit and greater sage-grouse.
TOTAL		453.5	

Conclusions

Collaborations with private landowners, government and other conservation groups allowed us to complete two land acquisitions in 2015/16, conserving 453.5 ac (183.5 ha) of high-quality wildlife habitat across the province. These conservation projects have an estimated land value of approximately \$758,000.

We continue to explore additional securement opportunities across Alberta. Negotiations are currently underway on several other initiatives. Among these are 1) a potential land donation of 320 ac east of Innisfree in our Northeast Region; 2) a potential land donation of 155 ac northwest of Vermilion in our Northeast Region; 3) a potential land donation of 110 ac southeast of Two Hills in our Northeast Region; 4) a potential land donation of 40 ac south of Elk Point in our Northeast Region; 5) a potential land purchase of 318 ac southwest of Manning in our Northwest Region; and 6) a potential land purchase of 495 ac southwest of Medicine Hat in our Southern Region. We recognize that collaboration is key to our success, and we will continue to work with partners to accomplish our conservation goals.

Communications

- Added five new Conservation Sites to our provincial database for advertisement on our website and inclusion in our *Discover Alberta's Wild Side: Annual Outdoor Adventure Guide*.
- Delivered presentations to Alberta Environment and Parks staff in the Lower and Upper Peace and Upper Athabasca Areas promoting ACA's land securement programs.
- Featured an article about the Escape Coulee Conservation Site promoting partners coming together to secure important wildlife habitat in our Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- Featured an article about the Letourneau Conservation Site and the donor in our Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- Developed a brochure, *Leave a Legacy. Conserving Your Land, Your Way*, promoting several options landowners may use to conserve wildlife habitat.

Photos



Mixedwood forest at the Drake Conservation Site in our Central Region. Photo: Marco Fontana



Riparian and stream habitat along the Raven River at the Drake Conservation Site in our Central Region. Photo: Marco Fontana



Farm site before demolition and reclamation at the Silver Sage Conservation Site (expansion) in our Southern Region. Photo: Brad Taylor



Farm site demolition and preparation for reclamation at the Silver Sage Conservation Site (expansion) in our Southern Region. Photo: Tyler Johns



Riparian habitat along a coulee at Silver Sage Conservation Site (expansion) in our Southern Region. Photo: Brad Taylor