

**Alberta Conservation Association
2020/21 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: MULTISAR – West

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Partnerships

Alberta Beef Producers

Alberta Environment and Parks

Alberta Fish and Game Association – Minister Special Licence Program

Canadian Cattlemen’s Association

Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef

Cows and Fish – Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society

Government of Canada – Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Landholders in Southwest Alberta

Prairie Conservation Forum

Shell Canada – Foothills Legacy Fund

Key Findings

- We completed one Habitat Conservation Strategy in partnership with a ranch (4,312 acres) located in southwest Alberta.
- We partnered with another cattle producer to 1) develop three upland watering sites to reduce pressure on riparian habitat, 2) implement a portable watering unit to lessen pressure on

wetland habitat, and 3) deploy a portable fencer to distribute cattle further upslope from sensitive riparian zones.

- We partnered with a second cattle producer to implement a portable watering unit to reduce pressure on wetland habitat.
- We partnered with a third cattle producer to rehabilitate a riparian area that was previously impacted by livestock by planting approximately 2,040 riparian shrubs.

Abstract

While it is true that the majority of Species at Risk (SAR) are found in the Grasslands Natural Region of southern Alberta, the Foothills, Parkland, and Rocky Mountain Natural Regions of southwest Alberta boast some of the province's most ecologically diverse landscapes and provide habitat for many SAR including the little brown bat, bull trout, grizzly bear, limber pine, western wood pewee, and westslope cutthroat trout. Best management practices and habitat enhancements occurring on farmlands within this area have enabled many of these species to persist, but there are also many opportunities to further enhance habitat quality for these species while mutually benefiting agricultural operations.

In 2020, we collaborated with one private landowner to complete a Habitat Conservation Strategy on a ranch totaling approximately 4,312 acres. We identified 110 different wildlife species on this ranch, including 27 that are considered *Endangered*, *Threatened*, or *Species of Special Concern*. In total, we had 908 observations of wildlife species and conducted 84 range habitat assessments, five flowing water health inventories, four freshwater assessments, and three visual riparian plots. We partnered with three cattle producers to implement seven habitat enhancements, including the implementation of alternate watering systems for cattle, and planting 2,040 riparian shrubs along a tributary to the Oldman River which supports populations of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Building on long-term landowner relationships that ACA has established through previous projects have enabled us to collaborate with producers and implement enhancements in 2020. Our goal is to continue building on this reciprocated trust and respect so that we can collaborate on future projects that mutually benefit habitat for wildlife, SAR, and ranching operations in southwest Alberta.

Introduction

Many species at risk occur in southwest Alberta, an area characterized by fescue grasslands, rolling topography, deciduous and coniferous forest that often overlap with agricultural landscapes. Existing management practices on these lands is what has allowed these species to persist. We work collaboratively with multiple partners to further increase, maintain, and improve habitat for Species at Risk (SAR) in southwest Alberta, while mutually benefiting the producer's operations. This partnership involves wildlife surveys, habitat assessments, development of voluntary habitat conservation strategies, and subsequent implementation and monitoring of on-the-ground enhancements.

A Habitat Conservation Strategy (HCS) is a five-year extendable voluntary plan that identifies beneficial management practices and habitat improvement recommendations to encourage sustainable ranching operations. We develop these plans after first conducting in-depth habitat, wildlife, and fish surveys, along with vegetation inventories and range and riparian health assessments. We evaluate these results with the needs of SAR and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed on solutions are adopted and integrated into the strategy, with priorities listed, along with a monitoring plan to assess progress. After signing a five-year stewardship agreement, we assist the producer with implementing the agreed on enhancements and grazing strategies. Progress is reassessed every five years, with adjustments incorporated into a living management plan for the operation. A landowner questionnaire is also completed to identify what is or isn't working from their perspective, which helps us readjust the plan going forward. Another five-year stewardship agreement may be signed for continued implementation of the strategy.

Methods

In mid-April, we conducted a sharp-tailed grouse survey at a known historic lek (dancing ground) located on the property following established protocols (GOA 2013). In the spring, we completed multi-species point count surveys to measure the occupancy of birds and document the presence and abundance of all wildlife species observed on the ranch (Landry-DeBoer and Downey 2010). We also surveyed riparian areas in the spring and summer months making

observations of wildlife and fish associated with these areas. To further supplement our visual observations, we set up a bat meter and a trail camera in key/remote areas.

We also completed range health assessments (Adams et al. 2005) and riparian health assessments following protocols outlined by Cows and Fish (Fitch et al. 2009, Ambrose et al. 2009). Results from these assessments were incorporated into a landholder specific HCS report, that includes management recommendations and suggestions for implementing habitat enhancements that mutually benefit the ranching operation and habitat for SAR.

Ordinarily, a large part of our effort goes into communication activities; however, this past year's activities were somewhat limited due to restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Activities normally include presentations and tours to funding agencies and partners, and participation in several conferences and workshops, but we did not complete any of these this year. We anticipate that we will return to these activities once it is safe to do so.

Results

In 2020, we completed detailed wildlife inventories, range and riparian health assessments, and made subsequent management recommendations for habitat enhancements on one ranch (4,312 acres) located in southwest Alberta. In collaboration with the producers on this ranch, we completed an HCS report and associated management plans where we identified 110 different wildlife species, including 28 that are considered *Endangered*, *Threatened*, or *Species of Special Concern* (Figure 1). Noteworthy observations that occurred during wildlife surveys included identifying a previously undocumented sharp-tailed grouse lek, the detection of several bat species, and a high density of wetlands supporting a diverse assemblage of amphibians and suitable nesting habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl. In total, we had 908 observations of wildlife species. On this same ranch, we also conducted 44 detailed range transects, eight range health assessments, five tame pasture assessments, 27 forest health assessments, five flowing water health inventories, four freshwater assessments, and three visual riparian plots.

In 2020, we implemented seven new habitat enhancements to reduce pressure on riparian habitat. In collaboration with a producer situated on the west side of the Porcupine Hills, we rehabilitated

a riparian area by planting approximately 2,040 riparian shrubs along a tributary to the Oldman River, which supports westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. In collaboration with a second landowner near Chain Lakes, we developed three natural springs as alternative watering sites for cattle and supplied a portable fencer and portable watering unit to help distribute cattle upslope and reduce pressure on riparian habitat. We partnered with a third producer near Twin Butte to implement a portable watering unit to reduce pressure on riparian habitat.

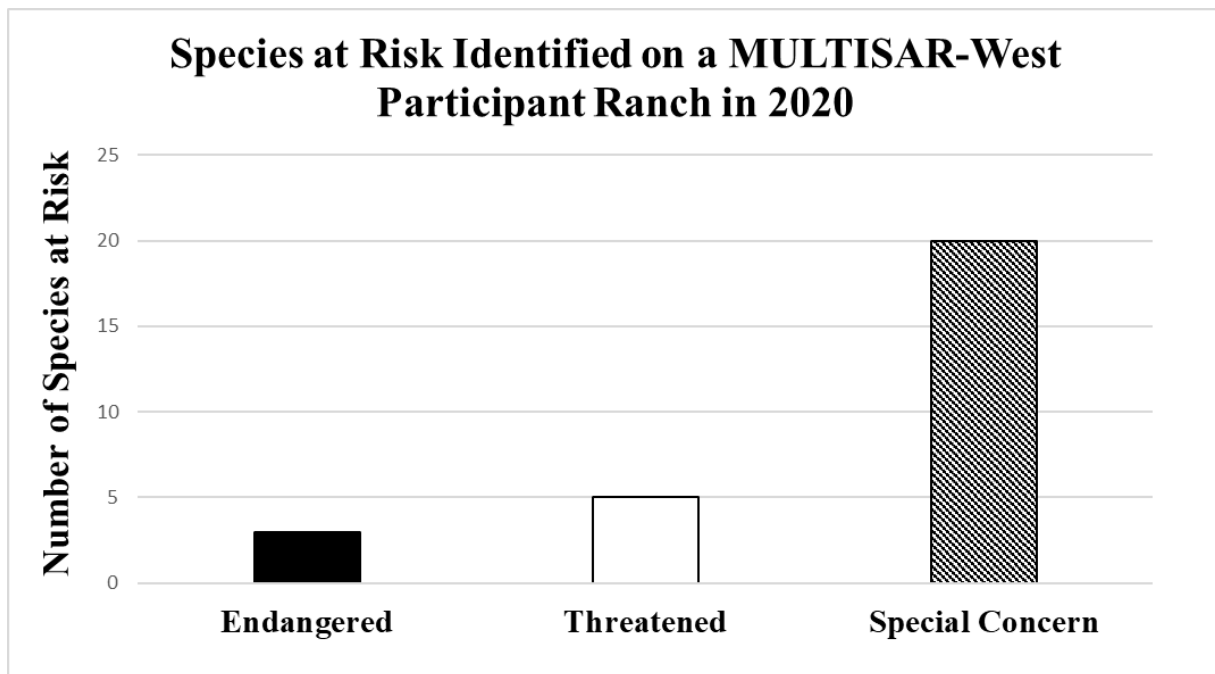


Figure 1. Species at Risk Identified on a MULTISAR – West Participant Ranch in 2020.

Conclusions

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners have allowed ACA to collaborate with producers and implement enhancements on 4,312 acres in southwest Alberta in 2020. To date, this project has benefitted seven producers, with producers on another 3,360 acres expressing interest for 2021. Participating landholders view this collaboration as non-threatening, and new relationships are being formed because of this awareness and through promotion of the program in the local community. MULTISAR – West was initiated as a result of the positive feedback and desire of landholders for us to expand MULTISAR beyond the Milk River basin. The western expansion has led to funding partnerships (~\$89,560 in 2020) and the support of Alberta Fish and Game Association –

Minister Special Licence Program, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, Government of Canada – Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Shell Canada – Foothills Legacy Fund. It is through these partnerships that we strive to foster mutually beneficial relationships with the agriculture community and improve wildlife habitat for all species on this land base.

Communications

- Interviewed for ranch feature on *Let's Go Outdoors* YouTube Channel with Michael Short (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec7LnAIX3AA>), Doug Manzer and Mike Verhage, June 2020.
- Wrote "More Than Meets the Eye: How Grazing Can Benefit Species at Risk" article in Alberta Conservation Association's *Conservation Magazine*, Mike Verhage, Fall 2020.

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Wildlife Division, Alberta SAR Report No. 135, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. 71 pp.

Photos



A solar-powered, portable watering unit reduces cattle pressure on wetland habitat on a ranch near Chain Lakes in southwest Alberta. Photo: Mike Verhage



ACA staff encountered this ruffed grouse on a drumming log while completing multi-species point count surveys on a ranch in southwest Alberta. Photo: Mike Verhage



ACA staff member, Brad Downey, completing wildlife surveys on a ranch in southwest Alberta.
Photo: Mike Verhage