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Conserving Alberta's Wild Side





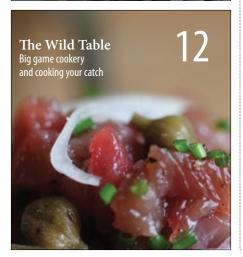


## CONSERVATION

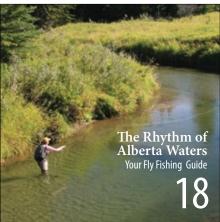


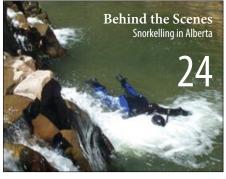


















Conserving Alberta's Wild Side

#### Our Mission

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



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**About Us.** Conserving Alberta's wild species and spaces requires commitment and passion, something we have plenty of. For 15 years, we have scaled mountains, navigated wild waters, fought off flies, endured hours in helicopters, and walked three quarters of the way around the planet—studying, assessing, counting and conserving some of Alberta's most common and iconic species and their habitat. Superheroes we are not, but there are times we feel a bit like one when we know we've made a difference.

Our work is possible because of our surrounding community. Many people, organizations and partners support us, including Alberta's hunters and anglers. These individuals and groups have contributed millions of dollars towards thousands of conservation projects. So the next time you are thrilled by the sight of a brilliantly coloured pheasant, the exotic looks of a pronghorn, or the tenaciousness of a bull trout—think of Alberta Conservation Association and our partners. Together, we conserve the outdoors you know and love today for future generations to enjoy.





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#### From the Editor

It was a tough slog—six months of winter and unpredictable spring weather sometimes obscured the silver lining. But, now that spring has officially arrived, nothing is sweeter than exploring the outdoors in fewer layers and feeling the sun release you from winter's grasp.

In this issue of Conservation Magazine, we show you how to embrace la dolce vita right here at home. Let fly fishing guru Dave Jensen tempt you to experience the excitement and tranquility found within "The Rhythm of Alberta Waters" on page 18. One ACA staff member said a particular photo has him daydreaming about placing a fly perfectly on the open water. He's making plans...

Our staff never ceases to delight. They entice you to learn more about what we do, tantalize your taste buds with recipes, or draw you in to discover hidden places. Marco Fontana sets the stage on page 10 with landowners, Jean and Janet Doll. Nature has rewarded the Dolls for 30 years of protecting their streambanks with assistance from ACA. Their "incredibly productive stream is teeming with large voracious trout, and has a brown drake hatch that fly fishers plan their summers around." Next up, are fishing fanatics, Paul Hvenegaard and Kevin Gardiner. They offer their best, mouth-watering, field-tested recipes in "You Caught it: Now Cook it." Mark page 14. The smoked candied trout is sure to be crowd-pleaser.

Fishing's not your thing? Under Alberta's chilly water is a hidden world of surprises according to Mike Rodtka. Unexpectedly, it's one that must be discovered...while snorkelling! If you're shivering already, wrap up in a blanket while reading "Behind the Scenes" on page 24. Mike swears the sights and fish antics will hook you. We don't want to leave you cold, though, so warm up by travelling through some northern Alberta getaways with John Hallett on page 28. Consider it a dry-run before hitting the road where "forests and grasslands and even cactus" await. Have the kids tell you about the animals that live in the boreal forest on your way there with "Wild Tracks." Plus the activities might keep them busy for a while!

Now go. Tap into the beautiful rhythm of Alberta's spring and summer.



-Lisa Monsees, Editor-in-Chief Pictured at a peregrine hack (release site) bordering Pembina River Provincial Park.



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#### It's 3 a.m.

A boat creeps down the banks of the Owl River. Biologists lean overboard, peering into the inky water with search lights. Every inch of the murky shoreline will be scanned, up one side and down the next, looking for the tell-tale reflective glint among the grass and weeds. Once found. the location of each iridescent pearl is carefully recorded with GPS. It's not buried treasure these folks are after tonight. It's walleye.

Cue the swamp rock.

The purpose of this Bond-meets-Bayou scene is to determine habitat use and spawning activity of walleye in the Owl River, a major spawning tributary upstream from Lac La Biche. As for setting out in the middle of the night to count them, "walleyes" have a special light-gathering layer in their eyes called *tapetum lucidum* which makes them far easier to spot and distinguish in low light environments.

Despite decades of restocking and other habitat enhancement efforts, walleye fishing in the Owl River has been closed since the mid-1990s. It's a scene that's played out before in many different places: overfishing plus degrading riparian habitat equals declined or threatened fish stocks. Though commercial fishing is what brought the walleye population to collapse in Lac La Biche, biologists have since determined that adequate

spawning habitat is critical to the species' sustainable recovery.

So, as part of a multi-year program that engages landowners along the Owl River and carefully monitors walleye populations, the Owl River Riparian Restoration and Enhancement Project aims to restore healthy levels of this most popular—and delicious catch. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) has worked with numerous landowners whose grazing lands bank a 40 km stretch of the Owl River. Together, we've erected fencing and taken other measures to improve riparian areas, restore erosion, and keep intrusive vegetation at bay.

Two years in and the efforts are already paying off. Last spring's spawning run survey netted (literally) some 3,000 healthy, mature walleye moving into the river to spawn. And while hints of opening walleye once

again to sport fishers are but quietly muttered at this point, optimism has at least returned for the walleye population of Lac La Biche. Now that should put a happy glint in many an angler's eye.

#### The Latest

In the last year, wildlife-friendly fencing helped protect over 8 km of shoreline and more than 618 acres of riparian and wetland habitat along the Owl River. ACA worked with Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development and the leaseholder to adjust the affected grazing lease to reflect the new boundary. We also provided two off-channel livestock watering systems. The Owl River project is financed by partnership funding from Syncrude.

photo: ACA, Tyler Johns

### From Dollars to DNA

by Ariana Tourneur, ACA

admit it—we throw around a minimum of a dozen acronyms a day. While they're important to our everyday work, we get they don't mean much to others. But, one combination of letters really does mean something: GECF. Though it certainly doesn't roll off the tongue, the Grant Eligible Conservation Fund does almost everything else.

Thanks to Alberta's hunters and anglers, whose licence levies support community conservation work, \$842,898 was handed out through GECF for a range of research and on-the-ground projects. It's big dollars that add up to an even bigger reward—conserving Alberta's creatures and their habitat.

#### Stringing together the story

One grant in particular has taken research to the ground—literally. Digging up ancient bones and DNA is the name of the game. It involves resurrecting the past to uncover what patterns may occur in the future, providing new insight into an important part of Alberta's natural ecosystems: North American elk.

Overhunting and habitat decline in the 19th century nearly led to the eradication of Alberta's elk. Though they have been restored within in our Parks, there has been ongoing controversy surrounding past population sizes, their distribution and impacts from harvesting.

So, using 50 samples of elk bones and antlers from 16 archaeological sites dating back to at least 9,000 BP (what kid wouldn't want this job?!), researchers huddled in a special DNA lab to unearth hidden stories about Alberta's elk ancestors.

Ancient DNA analysis has the potential to tell us a lot, by reconstructing the genetic diversity and subspecies relationships of former elk populations. Nine of the sample remains contained DNA types that are unique and have not yet been identified in today's elk, unlike the other samples that have close ties to our modern populations. What we learn may affect the current management and conservation of elk, particularly the Rocky Mountain and Grassland subspecies. The more we know about our past, the better decisions we can make today. No bones about

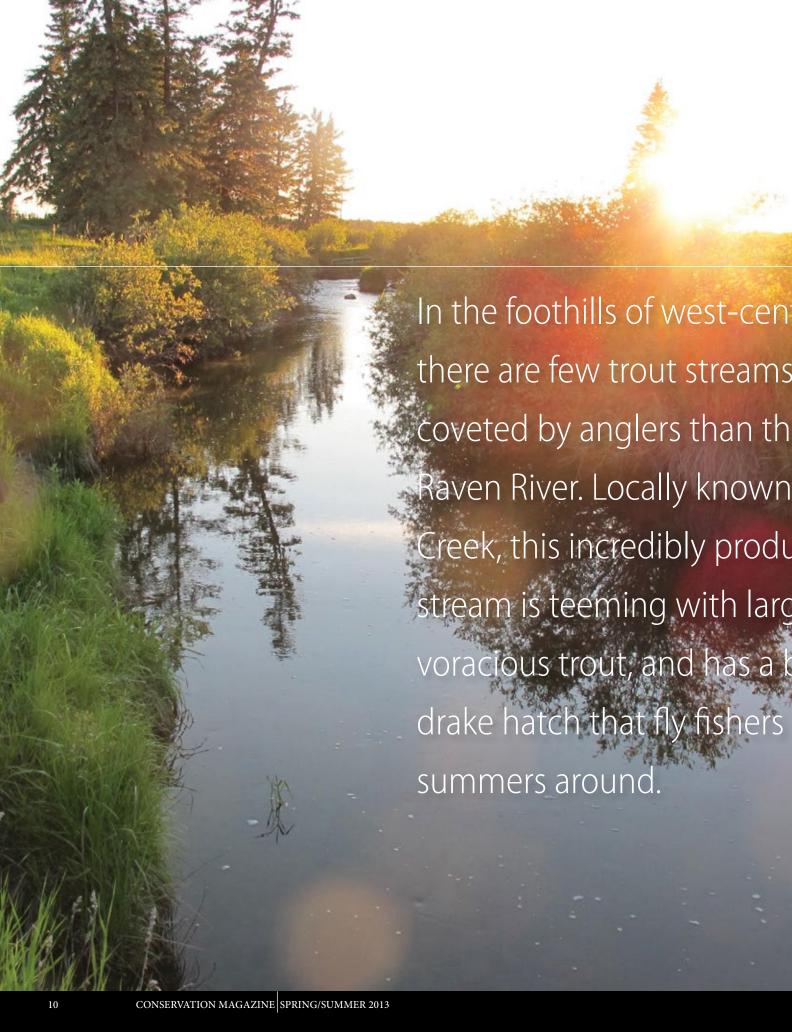
Did you know? In the late 1800s, measures such as bag limits, seasonal restrictions and hunting moratoriums were put in place to protect the remnant elk population, and elk were imported to re-establish Alberta's dwindling herds.

Project delivered by: Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary (B. Kooyman and C. Speller); Ancient DNA Laboratory, Department of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University (D. Yang and C. Speller); Parks Canada

#### A growing chunk of change

Since 2002, the GECF has given more than \$11 million to 651 projects in Alberta. The funding provided by the GECF leverages approximately SIX times its value in conservation dollars. That adds up to about \$63.8 million worth of conservation work making progress in Alberta. Read more about GECF projects at ab-conservation.com/gecf.

> WILD ON THE WEB How did researchers extract the tell-all DNA? Find out! ab-conservation.com/maa



## Meet the Landowner

by Marco Fontana, ACA

hestream wasn't always this way, and many can remember when intensive agriculture was taking its toll on riparian habitats. Landowners Dean and Janet Doll could see the damage the cattle were causing on the streambanks, but having grown up with cattle along the creek, Dean said it was something they got used to. They wanted the creek to be clean and healthy, and the family enjoyed the birds and wildlife that frequented the area, but whenever they explored their options to do something it seemed financially impossible.

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as Stauffer

photo: ACA, Kevin Gardine

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When the Dolls were offered assistance from the Buck for Wildlife Streambank Fencing Program, they didn't think twice. They've now been protecting the riparian habitat along the North Raven River for more than 30 years. In that time they've seen the vegetation along the banks grow tall, strong and thick, stabilizing once bare ground and providing shade and cover for fish. They see much more wildlife, and also more happy anglers fishing the creek. Through a new habitat leasing agreement signed with Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) in 2011, the Dolls currently protect 158 acres of land along the North Raven River, which can all be accessed by the public.

#### About the Dolls

The Dolls have been ranching in the community as long as there has been a community in the area to ranch in. Dean's



grandfather homesteaded on their current home quarter it's where Dean was born and raised—and the Doll's children and grandchildren live in the area. From hauling water up the hill for washing and drinking to watering cattle, fishing as kids, chasing pucks around in the winter and even skinny dipping, the creek has always been an important part of the Doll's life. Dean is quick to say, "We've been blessed to have what we have here."

Dean always thought the creek was special and remembers a time when he was out working and ran into an angler. It turned out the angler was from the southern States and had come all the way to fish the North Raven River, after reading about it in Field and Stream.

#### Visiting the North **Raven River**

The Dolls are generous landowners and consider the many anglers who visit the stream their guests. They are always ready for a quick hello and chat. If you want to visit, use respect, don't litter, pick up after those who do, and stay inside the fenced-off riparian corridor. Happy fishing!

ACA delivers riparian protection projects on both Crown-owned leases and on private land, like the Doll's, along the North Raven River and other streams in the foothills of the Eastern Slopes. For locations and details on access restrictions, check out the Annual Outdoor Adventure Guide (albertadiscoverguide.com).

"When a fancy magazine like Field and Stream knows about the creek, and someone would travel all that way to fish it, it must really be something."

- Dean Doll

The wild table from field to fork 



▶ by Kevin Kossowan

#### IT'S BACK

ig game cookery is going through a renaissance. Food writer extraordinaire Hank Shaw is winning James Beard awards for his game cookery work online, and huntresses like Georgia Pellegrini are carving a large niche in the culinary world. One of the top restaurants in the world, NOMA, is renowned for its use of wild Scandinavian ingredients. And if anything says "getting with the times," it's having your own Twitter hashtag: #wildfood is worth a follow.

Perhaps this renaissance is part of a slow adoption of everything Old World, where wild game meats are not in the homes of only hunters, but found on restaurant menus and at food markets. Legally we're a long way from that in Alberta, but thankfully we've had bubbles in the bison and elk industries in the past 20 years, leaving enough farmed operations in their wakes to create game supply for the non-hunter. Game cookery is exiting the niche and spreading its wings.

When it comes to game, many folks underestimate the impact of the weather forecast on their dining experience. May can offer hot, sunny days *and* blizzards. I'd wager you're going to enjoy your favourite game stew recipe a whole lot less in the heat of July, and swear at yourself for grilling a steak while being blasted by snow in April. So when thinking seasonal, think *micro-seasonal* and check the forecast before hitting the menu plan.

Kevin Kossowan is a local food writer deeply involved in Alberta's urban agriculture and foraging communities. He believes wild foods are critical to our regional food culture. Join us every issue as he celebrates Alberta's regional foods with tips, recipes and fresh ideas. Most game benefits from you pretending it's a fine beef steak—sear the meat hot and fast, and push it past med-rare at your peril. Let your game rest post-cooking for a few minutes, and make sure you salt it properly. Fire on all those cylinders and you'll have the cooking chops you need to do your fine ingredient justice. I have a ten times rule in the kitchen: commit to trying this approach ten times, and you'll crack it. Overly simple? Perhaps, but I've seen a lot of game on plates that would have benefitted from a large dose of keeping it simple.

Although it can be that straightforward, sometimes you might be looking for more. Here are a couple of things to try.

#### A Hot Summer Day Starter: **Tartare**

I grew up thinking beef tartare was something reserved for gastronomes seeking the off-putting, to be enjoyed in bistros and fine restaurants so they could tell their friends they ate it. Though that might apply from time to time, it is a fantastic way to celebrate top-quality cuts of meat. And it's nearly effortless.

Take a deck of cards-sized piece of the finest cut you can lay your hands on.

Slice and dice it with care, into pea to corn kernel-sized pieces.

Into a bowl it goes.

Think salad: you want to dress it with a nice oil that you'd use for a salad, and properly season with salt and pepper.

Stop there, spooning it onto a crostini or cracker with an excuse to open a nice bottle of red wine.

A fantastic—and easy—starter course.

Nice tartares often don't stop there, instead adding complexity with minced red onion or chives, fresh chili, or a touch of minced herbs. The best guide is not a recipe, in my opinion, but your palate and what's seasonally available. Add some pizzazz, and taste it. You'll quickly figure out if it needs more or if you overshot it and need to lighten up next time.

#### Spring & Summer Main: Steak Sandwich

Despite lingering chilly temps, we tend to be happy to pull out the grill come spring, and see it through the summer season. Without a doubt that puts grilled game on the menu, and as ridiculous as it may sound, one of my go-tos is a classic steak sandwich.

Let's be honest. The tenderloins are long gone. And the loin (backstrap) has likely been enjoyed at some point through the winter. If you're buying farmed game, those cuts are by far the most expensive. But don't despair. There are a lot of choice steak sandwich cuts left. Some personal favourites are the top sirloin (not to be confused with the sinewy sirloin tip, which is a jerky cut in my books). This is also a solid place for all those round steaks to meet their end. As tacky as it may sound, give this a go and tell me I've got it wrong:

Bring the steaks out to room temp to lose their fridge chill.

While you wait, pour a glass of red wine, cut a nice piece of bread (drink the wine, but don't eat the bread...yet).

Heat a small pot on the stove with a couple tablespoons of butter, a minced clove of garlic, and a touch of minced woody herb of your choice—rosemary, thyme, marjoram or oregano.

As soon as the garlic starts to fry, get it off the heat.

Give your steaks a light coat of oil; rub it on with your fingers.

Salt and pepper liberally.

Introduce it to your very hot grill. I'm a wood-fireonly kind of guy, but hardwood charcoal is another favourite.

When ready to flip, baste the steak in half the garlic/herb butter.

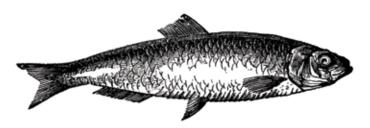
Toss your piece of bread on the grill and toast to your liking. Once toasted, baste the bread with your remaining garlic/herb butter.

Build your sandwich. Revisit the red wine. Thank me later. ■

#### WILD ON THE WEB

Try my riff on steak au poivre with blue cheese that's well worth a go: www.kevinkossowan.com/steak-au-poivre-with-cambozola-cream-sauce

Photos: Kevin Kossowan CONSERVATION MAGAZINE SPRING/SUMMER 2013 1



## You Caught it... Now Cook it!

▶ by Paul Hvenegaard, ACA and Kevin Gardiner, ACA

ishing etches memories in our minds that last a lifetime. But it's the act of cooking one's catch that elevates this memory—beyond the basics of conquering the creature or the appreciation of the natural setting. Preparing your mouth-watering catch is the "red bow" that connects all the wonderful dots of the angling experience itself. We doubt anyone heads out camping to their favourite fishing lake without some sort of anticipation around the fresh fish meal!

Remember, care of the catch is equally as important as how it's prepared. If possible, keep your catch alive (and fresh) in a live well up to the moment it's introduced to the fillet knife. If this isn't possible, fish for supper will stay quite fresh stored in a cooler on ice. Now we're ready to cook some fish!

"Cooking and serving the catch of the day is the culmination of our deep-rooted, primeval hunter-gatherer instincts."



#### **Smoked Candied Trout**

by Paul Hvenegaard

One of the best ways to prepare stocked rainbow trout is to smoke them. It takes a bit of preparation, but we promise the extra effort is well worth it.

- **1)** Soak fillets for 24 hours in brine consisting of 8 parts water, 4 parts brown sugar and 2 parts salt. For the latter, we like to use a 50:50 mixture of soya sauce and table salt.
- 2) Air dry the fillets on smoker racks for 4 hours before going into the smoker set at 90 F.
- 3) After 30 minutes, apply heavy smoke and increase temperature to 130 F; continue for 1 hour.
- **4)** Finally, raise the temperature to 170 F and continue until fillets reach an internal temperature of 145 F, which is typically when the flesh becomes flaky.
- **5)** Air dry for a couple of hours and enjoy.

#### Fresh Walleye Cheeks

by Kevin Gardiner

Nothing is more tantalizing to the table fisherman than a catch of fresh walleye. Those of us who have experienced a fresh walleye fry or two start salivating as soon as we scoop one in the net. In Alberta, we don't have a lot of opportunity to bring them home, so when a legally caught walleye lands in the cooler, it needs proper preparation. The best way to clean this fish is good old fashioned filleting. A harvestable walleye in Alberta is large enough that filleting works nicely.

You've probably heard of cod cheeks, but have you tried walleye cheeks? Those who have consider them the tastiest cut. Plus, they are super simple to remove and prepare. I'm ashamed to admit that I cleaned walleye and didn't eat the cheeks for years, until my co-author clued me in! Having now enjoyed many a cheek, I am proud to say it won't happen again.



To remove a walleye cheek, simply make a straight up and down cut just behind the eye, on the front edge of the cheek. Then cut in a circular motion around the outside. That's it! The cheek is easily skinned, by hand if you prefer, and voilà! Prime boneless walleye. They can also be scooped out with a paring (serrated) spoon. In addition to the great eating ahead, you'll be a big hit at the cleaning counter or at home with your kids. The last time I cleaned walleye, there were comments like, "Gross, he's going to eat the face!" But I tell you what—once they were on the table, not one person complained.

With your clean fillets and walleye cheeks ready, it's time to cook! There are a million recipes out there on how to cook fish, and any for pike, perch, bass or walleye should work.

I'm a simple man, so for me it's a dip in seasoned flour and a float in hot butter until flaky. For seasoning I like Montreal steak spice, salt and pepper. I believe this method is used by most—because it always turns out perfectly. Some people exchange lard for butter, and health nuts may want to use organic oils. The point is, it's flexible!

Walleye are a good filleting fish, but you might still miss some bones. When serving fish to young children or your future in-laws, give them the tail pieces or the cheeks, which should be bone free.



















Every year, we release thousands of rainbow trout into Alberta's lakes and ponds. We also aerate select waterbodies, all for your fishing pleasure.



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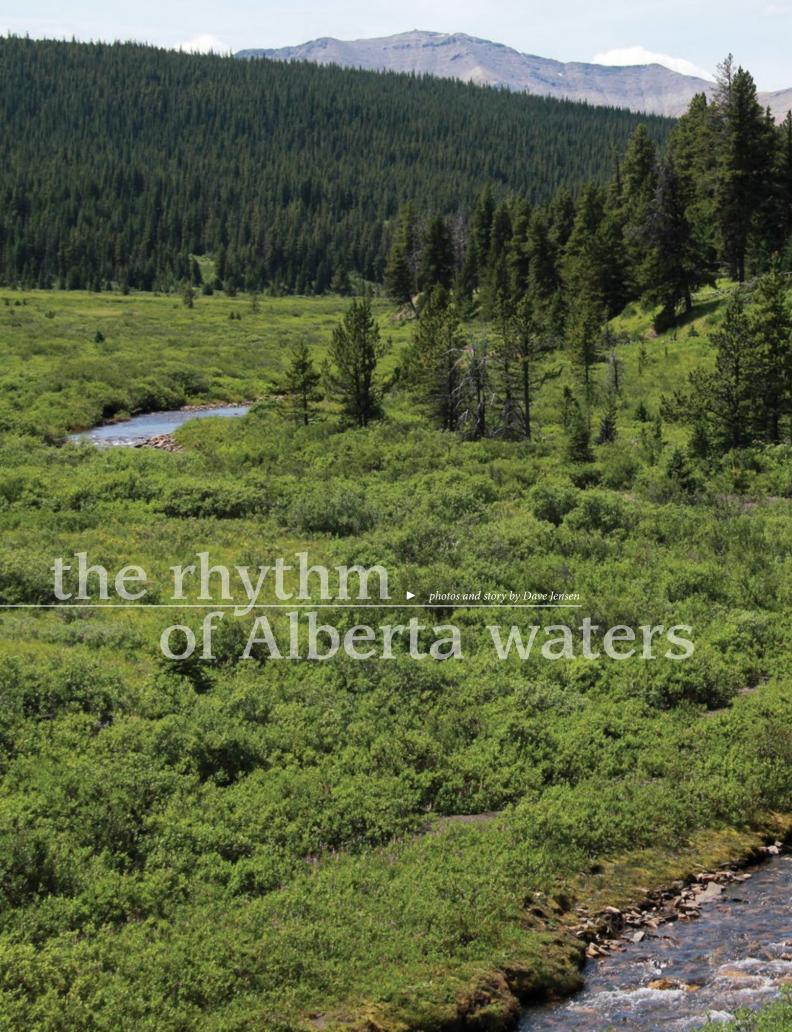
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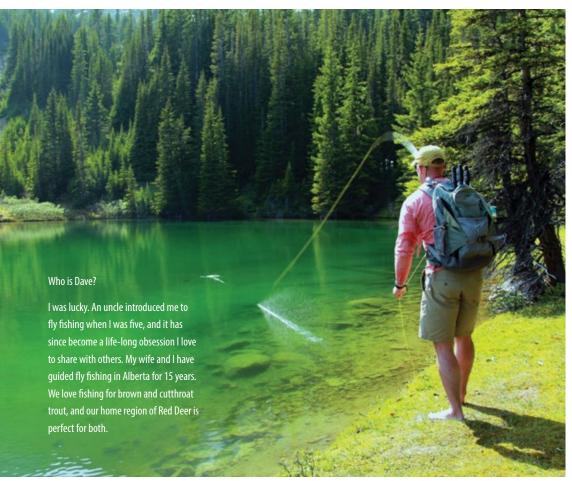




#### fly fishing in Alberta

you don't fly fish, you might think the sport is a head scratcher. After all, isn't it a way to make a leisure activity as difficult as possible—with light gear, miniscule hooks, and heaps of mandatory precision and patience?

The enthralling aspect of fly fishing is wrapped in the subtleties, in those intimate moments shared with trout. It amplifies the entire experience, hammering at your emotions and nerves. Given how much can go wrong in all the little things, trout usually fare well. But once you lose yourself in the sport, it will challenge you to explore Alberta's most breathtaking places: hike one of our great canyon rivers, scale scree slopes to an alpine lake, effortlessly float the Bow or Red Deer River, or walk the back paddock of a pasture waiting for a brown trout to rise on a perfect sunset.



A stunning summer day on a southern Alberta cutthroat trout alpine lake



#### Our bestsellers

Southwest of Calgary has long been the most popular region to fly fish in Alberta. The Livingstone and Oldman Rivers can get busy. Others, such as the Highwood, Sheep, Crowsnest, Carbondale and Castle, offer tremendous fly fishing opportunities for rainbow and cutthroat trout, as well as large bull trout and a few browns. These rivers and their important tributaries comprise the best freestone (riffled, rocky water) trout streams in our province.

#### The great one

The Crowsnest River is a perfect trout stream. Thanks to the Chinook winds, the river remains ice free in many reaches all winter and provides year-round fly fishing (so too the Oldman River below the dam). The "Crow" is mid-sized for Alberta, about 10 yards wide on average. Late fall through early spring water levels are low and trout can often be spotted. It offers some of Alberta's earliest and latest season insect hatches, and delicate approach and presentation is usually required for success. It's one of the rare trout streams that gifts special moments in a peaceful setting, regardless if you have the river to yourself or share it with throngs of others.





the rhythm of Alberta waters

#### The specialties

#### Bow

To a non-angler looking out from downtown Calgary on a sunny summer day, the flotilla of dinghies and inner tubes makes it hard to see Canada's premier trout river. But the blue ribbon that coils through a city of a million people holds trout fly fishing opportunities rivalling the best in the world!

Most of the summer it's packed: 50 or more guided drift boats dot the water, fly fishers on personal pontoons glide by, wade anglers scrutinize the shorelines. The Bow offers excellent seasons of dry fly fishing with a substantial population of healthy rainbow and brown trout, and other fly fishing methods such as nymphing and streamer fishing. If you live nearby, it's an excellent location to learn to fly fish or advance your skills. Best of all, there are numerous fly fishing shops and clubs to join. Many feature articles in international magazines have been written about the Bow, and ample information online provides great insight to fishing it.

#### Athabasca

The Athabasca River has an inland native strain of rainbow trout. Many people see them as abundant, but too small to get excited about. It is only their habitat limitation that keeps their sizes in check—given more productive habitats and lower population density, they can grow to five or six pounds. But it was their fate to remain generally small in the cold, slow-growing habitats of north-central Alberta. Look at a map of North America—they live a long way from the famous, productive trout waters of Montana, Wyoming and Colorado.

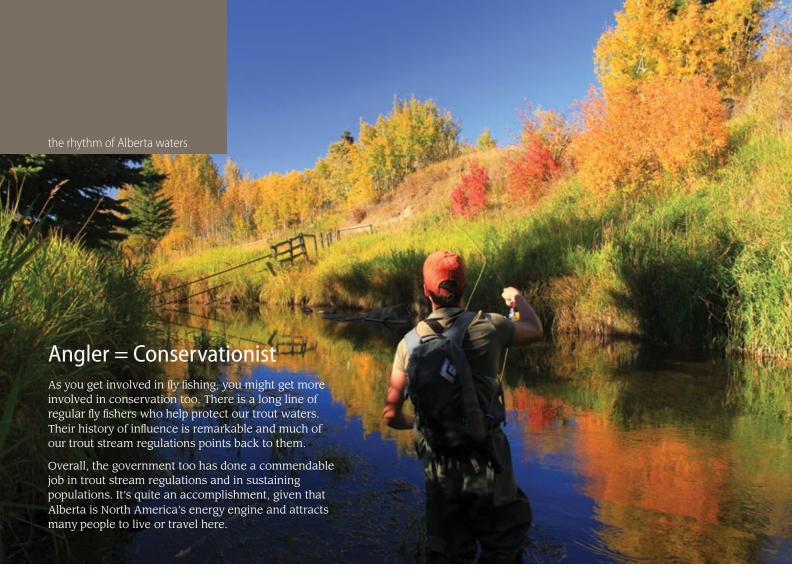
These stunning, vivid rainbows keep their parr markings of youth and unabashedly rise to dry flies at the peak of summer. Of course, summer comes late in the Athabasca drainage (after alpine snow melt run-off ends mid-July), and fall ice can come late September. The future of Athabasca rainbows is tenuous, with continued habitat disruptions and increased access to this slow-growing population. Pay attention to it and explore the little known waters of the McLeod, Freeman, and Athabasca Rivers and their tributaries.



#### Bring on the browns

My home region west of Red Deer is the best brown trout fishing in Canada, and not far removed from equalling the world's best. My wife and I are fortunate to spend three months a year fly fishing the fabled trophy brown trout waters in New Zealand, It's wonderful, but lacks the rhythm of Alberta waters. At home, the annual waves of insect hatches and the predictable windows of rising trout provide enchanting moments you simply long for.

This region runs from Cochrane to Rocky Mountain House, slightly west, and easterly to the city of Red Deer, where the Red Deer River itself remains an intriguing brown trout fishery in its own right. Streams like Prairie Creek have excellent hatches of stoneflies and some fat browns. A few spring fed creeks, like Stauffer and Clear Creek, offer more of a challenge as their clear water and popularity generate spookier trout. These waters aren't for everyone, mind you—it isn't obvious fishing, access permission from landowners is required, and casting room is often obstructed by heavy bush lining the water. Brown trout in the 12 to 20" range are plentiful though. Of course, much larger brown trout that many spend their lives dreaming about lurk there too, and those dreams keep fly fishers in perpetual exploration of our waters.



#### The golden ticket

Alberta is fortunate to be the only province in Canada with viable golden trout populations open to fishing. Government biologists arranged egg acquisition in the late 1970s with introductions made to several alpine lakes. A couple didn't make it and habitat impacts have limited some populations, but they are in general good health.

The lakes west of Nordegg (Coral and Michelle) are difficult to access by foot so local helicopter services provide access. We used to guide fly fishing here but, frankly, loads of people are flying in and we saw too much negative impact on these high alpine environments to continue. And yes, there's some hypocrisy in

having promoted the fishing opportunity then curtailing it, but that's how it had to go. These lakes will eventually see some form of access and use limitations.

South of the Crowsnest Pass there are more productive golden trout lakes. Barnaby and Rainy Ridge Lakes offer magnificent vistas and gin clear waters. Expect a tiring yet stunning hike up. If you can make the trek, then camp, catch and release these gorgeous golden trout, and enjoy photographing the surrounding valleys, you've had an incredible fly fishing experience.



#### NOT all about trout

Walleye, goldeye and pike are all targets of fly fishing. When I was a kid cruising the docks at North Buck Lake, I took a fly rod after perch as well.

- Goldeye: plentiful on the North Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers, and these rivers are seldom fished outside city limits. On a warm summer evening, goldeye will rise en masse to the heavy caddis fly hatches.
- Pike and walleye: in rivers and lakes across the province. While walleye are caught on streamers and require deeper sinking fly lines and flies, pike can often be taken on large flies on the surface. There is quite a cult following of pike on the fly. The large predators tend to lie in wait, still, ready for a quick strike from their lair. A take on a big, floating fly is an amazing visual encounter.



#### **Fully stocked**

Stocked trout lakes have long grown trout for angler harvest. Across Alberta, scores of these small lakes are enjoyed, mostly by locals. Historically, a few lakes grew larger trout and anglers would drive quite a distance. Carson Lake (now McLeod) was a hot spot in the 80s, drawing crowds of Edmontonians for big rainbows. Cow Lake near Rocky Mountain House did the same.

Fisheries stocked more to meet the demand, which when coupled with more harvest, drove sizes down. A lake, with fixed production capability, can either feed a few fish to grow large quickly or sustain a larger, slower-growing populationand that's without angling interference. Of this came a new pursuit: fly fishers looking for lakes with larger trout.

In the ten years since first efforts were made to recognize this new interest, results have been mixed. Beaver and Bullshead Lakes produced fat, healthy rainbows until anglers heard about the sizes. Being only a decade and with the population boom, these lakes are an ongoing experiment and evolution to balance lake use with trout growth potential.

Stocked lakes that produce heftier trout include Swan Lake near Vallevview, Ironside, Fiesta, and Beaver near Caroline, and Police Outpost and Bullshead Reservoir in southern Alberta. In the meantime, the scores of other stocked lakes continue offering wonderful opportunities to take the kids out and enjoy catching 8 to 16" trout. (See page 17 for Alberta Conservation Association's list of stocked lakes.)

## A personal favourite

My obsession is the South Ram, part of the Ram River drainage south of Nordegg. It's a wild rivershed full of willing cutthroat trout in a rugged, deep canyon of sandstone and shale. It's physically challenging, and the stark beauty is humbling. The reward for your trek? Exceptional fly fishing.

Today, land use impacts have changed what was not long ago a personal, private wilderness. But as much as the land use and angling pressure has intensified, the fishing experience hasn't changed. I avoid peak season now, not wanting to ruin the nostalgia of a younger me, the solitude of my river.

How much more use it can sustain is hard to say. Westcentral Alberta's cutthroat trout water—the Bighorn, Blackstone, Cardinal, and North Ram Rivers—are low productivity waters that offer gorgeous scenery and good fly fishing, but are feeling the pinch of too many people. We may never have the good old days of huge bull trout back in these waters as they were 100 years ago, but let's hope they continue producing a few fat cutthroat trout to accompany the spectacular backdrop.

For us, summers in Alberta are too short to visit all our favourite spots, so we spend three months each year fly fishing the South Island of New Zealand. You see, fly fishing can become an unrelenting passion that whisks you to faraway places.

But, make no mistake, Alberta is our home. It's the place to catch the trout of your lifetime.

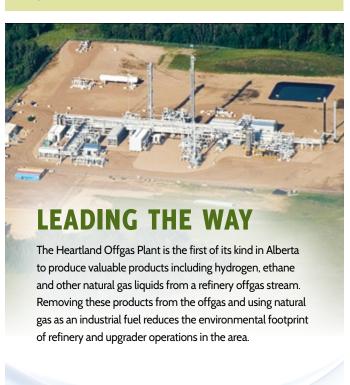


#### Say it ain't true: the misconceptions **CHA-CHING!** The sport is expensive.

Not so. Granted, I'm heavily into it and have nice rods. It wasn't always this way, and fancy rods never caught me more fish—I just like casting them. When I was a kid I used a \$49 Mitchell Special with rod, reel, and line included. Today, a starter package costs \$250. You can spend to the moon, but my advice is to take that money and invest in lessons and time on the water with friends and family. Priceless.

#### **SNOBS ONLY.** Fly fishing is for self-righteous elitists.

Again, not true. Think about it as another form of fishing, one that offers profound interactions with trout as we try introducing small flies to often unseen fish. Don't let anyone fool you into thinking it's pompous. It's fishing—nothing more, nothing less.





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"I am the wiser in respect to all knowledge, and the better qualified for all fortunes, for knowing that there is a minnow in the brook."

- Henry David Thoreau

ith such a fine appreciation for our finned friends, one can only speculate that acclaimed naturalist, poet and all-round deep thinker Henry David Thoreau may never have left Walden Pond if he could have gotten his hands on some snorkel gear! Most Albertans likely associate snorkelling with exotic locations like Fiji or the Bahamas. That's fine if you like tepid water, hungry sharks and overpriced drinks sporting bamboo umbrellas, but you are missing out on a whole world of discovery right in your backyard.

#### Honesty first

To be sure, snorkelling Alberta's lakes and streams is no Caribbean vacation. Although people do it, I personally try to avoid snorkelling in Alberta outside

the dog days of summer. Even then, the water can be...bracing. But these cold waters are also typically less productive, making for better underwater visibility.

Our fish may be less colourful than the tropical ones, but what they lack in flash, they more than make up for in character. I've chuckled at schools of mountain whitefish rooting amongst the gravel of a Rocky Mountain stream bottom like so many silver-sided hogs, and marvelled as a shoal of yellow perch suddenly materialized around me out of the murky green waters of a central Alberta lake. Spending time in the water is often its own reward. The quicksilver surface of a sun-splashed stream, viewed from this completely opposite perspective, is mesmerizing. An afternoon spent exploring the shore of a local lake can

generate similar feelings of accomplishment and wonder as an alpine hike.

#### Before you get wet

Gearing up for snorkelling doesn't need to break the bank. A perfectly adequate mask and snorkel set can be purchased in the summer months at most sporting goods stores for the cost of a meal out. This, along with a swimsuit, is all you need to explore many of our warmer lakes in the summer months (fins are helpful but not necessary).

If you get bitten by the snorkelling bug, a wet suit is a good investment for cooler waters. A full suit with hood, boots and gloves will allow you to extend the season or explore colder lakes and streams. Remember when shopping that the thicker wet suits are warmer



is remarkable how much an afternoon spent in cool water can sap your energy, even on the hottest of days. Trail mix, a chocolate bar or some other highcalorie snack and a thermos full of something warm waiting back on shore will help you recharge.

Also be considerate of others when on the water—anglers typically don't appreciate someone floating through their favourite trout fishing hole! To avoid transferring unwanted aquatic organisms between watersheds, be sure to thoroughly clean your gear between trips. Finally, avoid unduly disturbing the wildlife you observe...fish may not be as cute and cuddly as their terrestrial counterparts, but they have feelings too.

I learned to snorkel as part of my job, but these days I find myself snorkelling Alberta's lakes and streams recreationally more often than for work. Snorkelling is a great source of relaxation, inspiration and discovery. Give it a go. There's a whole new world waiting just under the surface for you to explore, right here at home.

Most Albertans likely associate snorkelling with exotic locations like Fiji or the Bahamas. That's fine if you like tepid water, hungry sharks and overpriced drinks sporting bamboo umbrellas, but you are missing out on a whole world of discovery right in your backyard.





#### **Snorkelling Safety**

- Never snorkel alone.
- Assess water hazards (e.g. logjams, poor water clarity, waterfalls) before entering the water; avoid areas of extreme water velocity, turbulence and frequent boat traffic.
- Stay alert for terrestrial hazards (e.g. bears, falling rock).
- Be aware of the local weather forecast; avoid snorkelling during storms with lightning or heavy rains.
- Recognize the symptoms of hypothermia and know how to treat



and more buoyant, a definite plus for longer excursions. While I've snorkelled in water as cold as 6 C in a wet suit. I don't recommend

Nothing compares to a dry suit for comfort in frigid conditions. As the name suggests, dry suits keep the water away from your skin and allow you to dress in warm layers as you would for a day out in winter. Although relatively costly, a properly maintained dry suit will give many years' worth of service. Sturdy footwear is a must when snorkelling rocky streams; anglers will find their wading boots work quite well, but an oversize pair of running shoes will do in a pinch.

As with any day spent afield there are some tips and precautions that will help you get the most out of the trip. Safety is top priority when snorkelling. It

## Getting down and dirty on the farm

▶ by Erin VanderMarel, ACA

he golden hills gently roll on into the sunset, lazy cattle chew, and a green tractor chugs along the horizon. It's a familiar piece of Alberta. Agriculture is still deep-rooted and important as ever here. But every once in a while, the land needs a break.

Intense, unbroken agricultural land use can have a negative impact on our wild creatures and their habitat—even more so when a waterbody is part of the equation. It's all about balance. That's why Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) creates pockets of wildlife habitat areas, like one property we're working on near Rocky Mountain House. The Leavitt Conservation Site is 20 minutes southeast of town, and home of the headsprings to the North Raven River—locally known as Stauffer Creek. We've taken a number of steps, all requiring plain old get-your-hands-dirty grunt work, to get the land flourishing again.



## CONSERVATION WORKS



## STEP Turn pasture to forest

A lot has changed since the land was transferred to ACA in 1997. Grazing was contained within a small parcel using off-site watering systems to generate modest lease revenue, and with any luck, to model responsible agricultural management.

In 2007, we decided to phase out grazing completely so native vegetation could regenerate the pasture lands. Now, willows grow well into the old pasture and saplings dot the land. In 2012, we removed the fence separating the old grazing areas and protected habitat, giving wildlife easier access to the entire site.

Following our reforestation plan for the site, re-vegetation of the pasture lands included planting 2,000 aspens along the site's edge, acting as a buffer from the road. Plantings of native shrub species is next: think red-osier dogwood, rose species, wolf willow, cherry species and saskatoons. Growing throughout the site are over 3,000 white spruce, planted by the Rocky Junior Forest Wardens a few years back.

top: Spruce tree planted by Rocky Rams Junior Forest Wardens. photo: ACA, Erin VanderMarel

left: Leavitt site fence removal.
photo: ACA. Cali Seater

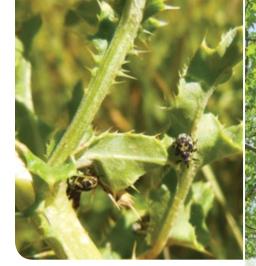
## **Protect a popular fishery**

The North Raven River boasts a variety of sportfish species but is renowned for its brook and brown trout populations, and for being a challenging river to fish. The 1980s brought on the start of fish habitat protection, when studies showed a decrease in fish numbers.

The headsprings, located on the Leavitt site and at Stainbrook Springs (1 km downstream), are spawning and rearing grounds for both brown and brook trout. Excluding cattle from the river completely was the first obvious step to protecting the in-stream habitat and fish populations. Instream structures—which is really just a fancy term for upturned tree roots and star-shaped arrangements of logs and willow bundleswere installed at Stainbrook Springs over the last 10 years to enhance fish habitat. More recently, willow bundles were placed along the shores at Leavitt to improve shade and escape cover for fish. Fish populations and sizes have steadily increased.

The North Raven River at the Leavitt site. nhoto: ACA Cali Seater





Stem-mining weevil (Hadroplontus litura) on a Canada thistle plant at the Leavitt site.

photo: ACA, Erin VanderMarel

#### STEP **S**Wage a battle against thistle

Canada thistle is an ongoing weed problem at the Leavitt site. Due to the proximity of the springs as well as the natural shallow groundwater table, we have prohibited pesticide use—which means we're exploring alternative ways to manage weeds. Past methods included mechanical clearing. Extremely labour intensive, it had little impact on the malicious thistle. After much discussion and research, we landed on biological control as our weapon of choice.

The West Central Forage Association has used biocontrol agents, like the stem-mining weevil (Hadroplontus litura), to curb thistle populations for the last five years. This little weevil burrows into the thistle and lay eggs which later chew their way out as larvae. Holes left behind weaken the plant and increase the risk of other pathogens entering and injuring the plant, such as the thistle rust and frost, increasing the chance of a secondary infection. A plot was established at the Leavitt site and 315 weevils were released in the fall of 2012. This is the first release for ACA, and year one of a three-year pilot study to determine whether biocontrol is worth using at other Conservation Sites.

Another method we tested last summer was the cutting and flooding of thistle stems. We established another plot on the site and all thistle stems were hand trimmed and then flooded with water. Other vegetation in the plot was left so it would have a leg up to outcompete the damaged thistle. Next year we will be able to determine its success.

> Rub on tree at the Leavitt site. photo: ACA, Erin VanderMarel



## Reap your rewards

The Leavitt site is now a habitat oasis tucked into a busy agricultural landscape. Signs of wildlife are everywhere, and fish populations are re-established. A new parking lot along the southern edge of the property lets everyone enjoy the secluded site. If in the area, take the time to stop in; you might spot a moose, white-tailed deer fawn, or ducklings in the nest boxes. And if we can call anything perfect, that just might be it.



#### I love living where I do, because

Grid C2 has 103 Conservation Sites, coming in at an impressive 74,635 acres. Although I've lived in northern Alberta for over 12 years, there are still loads of sites that are new to me. The sheer diversity and size of the sites is amazing—a short drive from my home can take me hiking through a 1,000 acre Conservation Site with forests and grasslands and even cactus! Another short drive and I'm strolling on the shore of a 1,000 acre lake with geese and ducks paddling by. Come on up and see what the north is all about!



photos: ACA, Garret McKen

## Getaways by John Hallett, ACA

**Lot 27 Uplands** is a Conservation Site with history. Its name comes from it being one of the original river lots on the Peace River, surveyed out before the rest of Western Canada was partitioned into the current township system. The beautiful rolling parkland of the Peace River valley demonstrates the mosaic of native grasslands and trees that so impressed Alexander Mackenzie when he boated by this place over 200 years ago. Naturalists appreciate the interesting variety of plant species including native grasses, prairie crocus, prickly pear cactus, saskatoons, and groves of aspen. Photographers enjoy capturing the scenic beauty everywhere you look. And everyone can enjoy walking and exploring

#### **Lot 27 Uplands**











140 acres

Site Partners: Alberta Conservation Association, Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

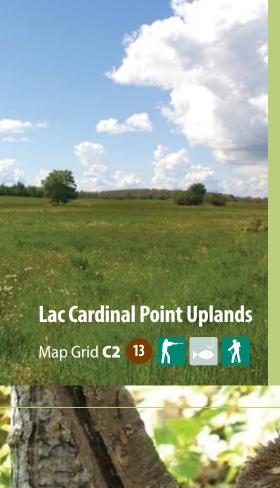


Directions: The site is conveniently located 8 km southwest of the Town of Peace River on Highway 684 (Shaftsbury Trail).



Check it out because: Lot 27 Uplands boasts a huge variety of plant life and a dose of Alberta's history!





Lac Cardinal Point Uplands has it all. Its unique mixture of boreal forest, trails and haylands positioned on the north shore of Lac Cardinal makes for diverse natural areas and recreational opportunities. Haylands are managed primarily for wildlife, and provide nesting cover for waterfowl and food for ungulates. In fact, there's an abundance of waterfowl, upland game birds and ungulates that provides ample sporting opportunities for hunters. The site is also attractive for hikers, cross country skiers, and anyone who loves the diversity of Alberta's landscape.



671 acres

Site Partners: Alberta Conservation Association, Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, Ducks Unlimited Canada.



Directions: From Peace River go 14 km west on highway 2, turn right onto highway 35, and go north 5 km, and then west 4 km. A parking site is provided.



Check it out because: Jutting into the north side of Lac Cardinal, the site has over 7 km of easily accessible undeveloped shoreline—a waterfowl hunter's dream.

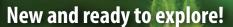
#### **Shell True North Forest**

Map Grid **C1** 104









In **Grid C1** is the Truth North Forest Project. This ACA owned land—twice the size of Vancouver's Stanley Park at over 1,700 acres—was once used for cattle grazing and hay production. Together, ACA and Shell Canada Limited are conserving this mixed habitat of established forest and new re-growth: the perfect combination for elk, deer and moose. Among the abundant birds is the barred owl, a Species of Special Concern in Alberta. We will enhance wetlands and plant trees, while allowing other areas to reforest over time. With excellent road access, it's the perfect getaway for hiking and bird watching.



the edge of agricultural lands and the forested Peace River valley, and boasts all the wildlife found in the boreal landscape. An added bonus is the site's easy accessibility, so hunters and naturalists can appreciate the trail enhancement for ruffed grouse habitat, and likely spot elk, deer or moose too! North Rabbit Lake is adjacent to other ACA and partner Conservation Sites, making the trip well worthwhile for those interested in exploring life on the edge.



320 acres

Map Grid C2 ohoto: ACA, Mike Jokinen

> Site Partners: Alberta Conservation Association, Nature Conservancy Canada, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Canada.

**North Rabbit Lake** 



Directions: The Conservation Site is 30 km southeast of Manning, or 8 km northeast of Deadwood, near the breaks of the Peace River valley. From the town of Peace River go 70 km north on secondary Highway 743 until the intersection of secondary Highway 690. Then go east 3.2 km and north 2 km to the site.



Check it out because: Wildlife, wildlife, wildlife!



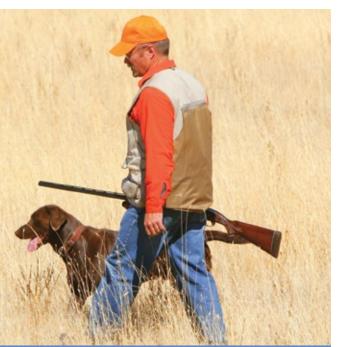


Dow is proud to support projects that create and sustain ecosystems in our plant communities. In partnership with the Alberta Conservation Association and the City of Fort Saskatchewan, we're working together to make the Lion's Club Fish Pond a fun place for families to enjoy together today – while preserving the area for future generations of anglers in our community.



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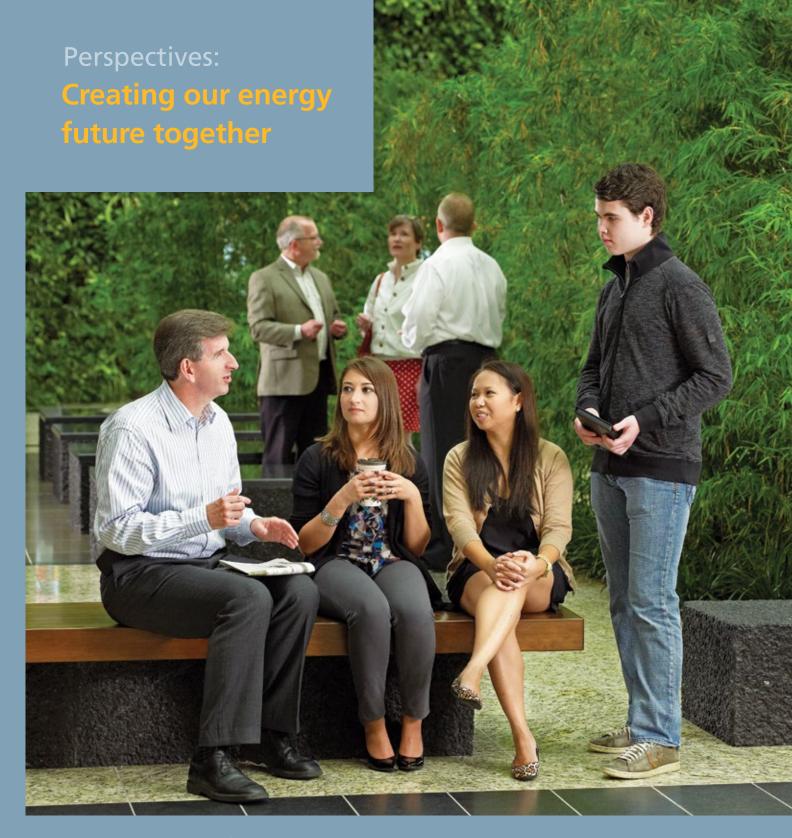
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The debate around our energy future has never been as polarized as it is today. For Suncor, sustainable development guides our decision-making. We believe resources should be produced and used in ways that generate economic growth, create social benefits and minimize the impact on the environment. Our approach is to engage with a variety of stakeholders to help us see different perspectives. Together we can build the energy future we all desire.







"Devon cares and it shows for their people, for their
communities, for the
environment.,, - Devon employee

Learn more about Devon's values at www.devonenergy.com

