

**BOW VALLEY NATURALISTS  
NEWSLETTER, Fall 2005  
BOX 1693, BANFF, AB  
T1L 1B6  
Phone: 762-4160**

**PROGRAMS/EVENTS**

**BVN meetings:  
7:30 pm., Banff Seniors Centre.**

**Wednesday, OCTOBER 26**  
**Conservation across the Medicine Line** with Jim Pissot.

**Wednesday, NOVEMBER 23**  
**Gratitude: a photographic tribute to the mountains by a cancer survivor** with Hans Fuhrer.

**Banff-Canmore Christmas Bird Count  
Saturday, December 17**

Potluck supper and compiling of results will follow at 6:00 p.m. in the Banff Seniors Centre

For details, contact Diane or Mike McIvor at 762-4160

**Exshaw/Seebe Count**

contact: Cliff Hansen (403) 673-2422

**BANFF NATIONAL PARK PLANNING FORUM**

**November 25 & 26<sup>th</sup>.**

Room 300, Donald Cameron Hall, The Banff Centre

**Friday: 9:00 am – 4:30 pm**  
**Saturday: 9:00 am – 3:00 pm**

The purpose of the annual planning forum is to provide an opportunity for Parks Canada to report on progress in implementing the Park Management Plan and for sector representatives and members of the public to offer their evaluations of the year's activities

BVN members are strongly encouraged to attend this event. It is an accountability session for Parks Canada that offers information on a range of issues and an opportunity to observe, perhaps even participate in, some of the current debates about the future of the park.

**ADDRESSES**

- **Hon. Stephane Dion,**  
Minister of the Environment  
Fax: (613) 952-1458  
e-mail: dion.s@parl.gc.ca  
House of Commons, Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6  
(no postage needed for the above)
- **Alan Latourelle, CEO, Parks Canada Agency**  
e-mail address: Alan.Latourelle@pc.gc.ca

**UPDATE FROM THE PRESIDENT**

*Peter Duck*

Welcome back to the new BVN season. We hope you have had a good summer and fall. BVN intends to offer a season of interesting evening presentations, species counts and updates about our environmental advocacy work.

Judging by the email traffic it has been a busy summer dealing with the usual parade of development proposals and issues. The on-going attempts by the developers at Three Sisters to compromise wildlife corridors, the Rafter Six vision for a mega-hotel, and the inappropriateness of special events on the rare grasslands of the Indian Grounds have led the summer show. In September, Ecotrust raising money by coordinating a mass recreation event in the Yamnuska was very disappointing - to put it politely. And of course it has been a tragic year as the litany of wildlife carnage on the highways, railways, and through management action continues. Just as we start talking about more moose in the valley the TCH meets the issue head on. Losing animals such as Bear 66 and her cubs along with the wolf pups strikes hard at the ecosystem as well as the hearts of the Bow Valley community.

On the other hand the BVN executive have reported a number of fascinating observations, reminding us of the joy of nature in the valley. We have heard about the discovery of a Columbia Spotted Frog by the Fairholme amphibian monitoring project at a wetland where this species has not been seen previously, fascinating butterfly stories, and tales of grouse chasing squirrels. And what's this I hear - the beaver have returned to Johnson's Lake! Was that really a Northern Mockingbird that was reported on Vermilion Lakes drive? A Greater white-fronted Goose at 2<sup>nd</sup> Lake? And then there was the Golden Eagle sitting proudly on top of its ground squirrel in full view of the Icefields parking lot. All this and more remind us how special this place is and why we drag ourselves to yet more public hearings to speak for nature. So, welcome again to the new season. Be sure to come out to our 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday-of-the-month presentations and join in the community of naturalists sharing the bright side of nature.

## ISSUES

### **TCH Speed Enforcement at Last! BVN President Pulled Over**

*Peter Duck*

It has been another tragic year for both wildlife and humans on area highways. One of the simplest and least costly solutions would be enforcement of slower speeds. So you can imagine my delight when I saw the red and blue flashers flare up behind me as cars whizzed past me with gay abandon on the TCH east of Canmore, Thanksgiving Monday. You can also imagine my family's complete astonishment when it became apparent that the flashing lights were directed at us. Were my signals and brake lights not working? Did my license plate fall off? Was the dog making rude gestures out the back window?

The officer approached and politely asked where I had been. "None of your bees wax!" came to mind but "Just finished some hiking and eagle watching in Kananaskis and we are heading back to Banff" meekly slipped out of my mouth. Then he nailed me. "I pulled you over because all these faster vehicles are having to get around you and I wanted to know why you were driving only 90 kilometres an hour. I wanted to see if alcohol was involved". I was then asked to keep pace with the rest of the traffic to avoid creating a hazard. There you have it. No more relaxing on your holiday weekend drives. Don't slow down to save fuel costs and the environment. Go just as fast as the rest of em' and you won't draw suspicion of being a drunk and you will keep our highways safe for the faster drivers. Hmmm...think we could get the wildlife to run faster across the road?

### **Lands Adjacent to the Town of Banff**

*Peter Duck*

The plan for human use of lands close to the Town of Banff has been evolving through several years of both internal and external committee consultations. It is our understanding that Parks Canada hopes to present a draft plan for public comment some time in November. The plan will affect where your recreational activities are conducted in the valley as well as the level of impacts from human recreation on the ecosystem. It will form the basis for direction to be included in the overall park management plan. Watch for and comment on this plan when it is presented.

## Rafters - Six Stories High?

*Peter Duck*

Rafter Six has applied to the M.D. of Bighorn for approval of a bylaw change that would allow for redevelopment of their property. The proposal, based on environmental information that included the result of an entire day of field work, would allow for greatly increased density on the site by upgrading the current lodge, building a new "wellness" resort, and a new sewage treatment plant. The proposal also clearly stated the Rafter Six ambition to develop a large equestrian facility and a hotel similar in size to the Chateau Lake Louise. At a late summer public hearing many people, some with direct financial interest in the development, spoke in favour of the proposal. A smaller number, including me on behalf of BVN, wrote and spoke against the by-law change and the major expansion it would facilitate. Neutral statements were also presented.

While they were dismissive of BVN's concerns, the M.D. Council later seemed taken by surprise when the Province of Alberta and their own staff indicated that the bylaw change would likely open the door to the large hotel vision rather than simply allow the more "modest" developments. The Province's submission also reinforced many of the points we and others had made when it expressed concerns for vegetation and wildlife and suggested the project could be large enough to trigger a formal environmental impact assessment. We are very grateful that the Province, while remaining neutral, raised questions about increased development and human density on this site and the effects that might occur on the adjacent protected areas including Bow Valley Provincial Park.

The Council has taken note of the information received at the hearing and continues to deliberate on the proposed by-law amendment. Please keep on top of this issue. The plant and animal communities at the entrance to the Bow Valley are very special and deserve every protection effort we can make.

## Language Matters

Mike McIvor

I decided to devote this edition of Language Matters to one word, the “B” word – “balance”. In particular, I want to consider the way its meaning is abused when it is invoked as a desirable foundation for land use planning and decision-making.

I shudder to think about the number of times I have heard developers, bureaucrats, politicians, justify their interest in expanding or intensifying the human imprint on the land, as a quest for balance. It sounds eminently reasonable, to be sure, in stark contrast to the demands of conservationists who supposedly are hell-bent on returning human civilization to the caves of our origins. Indeed, this version of balance frequently is cited as something to be embraced by conservationists if they wish to appear reasonable and therefore, be taken seriously. If you think it would be difficult to oppose motherhood, try standing against balance.

Of course these promoters aren’t talking about balance at all. They have corrupted a good word to use it as code for more development, more human use. Have you ever heard them use balance as a rationale for more conservation and less development? When I ask those who pitch expansion of development as a necessary condition for achieving balance to describe the imbalance they feel requires redress, there is no answer. How could there be? The street leading to the future of their desires is one way.

I doubt very many people spend much time wondering if the universe is continuing to expand but surely most of us are able to acknowledge the reality that our home planet is not. The notion that in a finite space, whether park, region, or planet, a state of balance between conservation and development can be reached by increasing the already dominant human presence, is patently absurd. We might be re-arranging the relationships between people, the land, and its non-human inhabitants, but we most certainly are not creating balance. For this reason, and because I resent efforts to force compromise by employing language for the way it feels, not what it means, I have done my best to eliminate the “B” word from my own vocabulary. It’s a warm, fuzzy trap to be avoided. (Obviously the next step will be to reclaim and rehabilitate the word, its meaning and utility.)

By its very nature, the corruption of language is insidious; without attention to the dangers, the mantras of exploitation may gain credence. Here is part of what the executive director of the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative wrote in a message of welcome to people attending their recent fundraising event in Canmore. *“The Bow Valley community is experiencing a tremendous amount of stress while attempting to balance growth with the needs of conservation”*.

Perhaps in the spirit of the evening – Laughter Gone Wild! – he was trying to elicit some chuckles with intentional irony. Or maybe he said it because it sounds like such a good idea. And for many aspects of human society, balance may be a worthy objective. But for landscapes facing unrelenting pressures, more of what undermines conservation efforts can’t be the solution. Anyone watching or participating in the struggles to resist the overwhelming onslaught of development knows very well the retention of conservation values in the Bow Valley is a salvage operation not a balancing act. I don’t wish to slight the person or organization responsible for the statement, I simply offer it as a pertinent example of the perils inherent in the matter of language.

## Taking the River’s Pulse

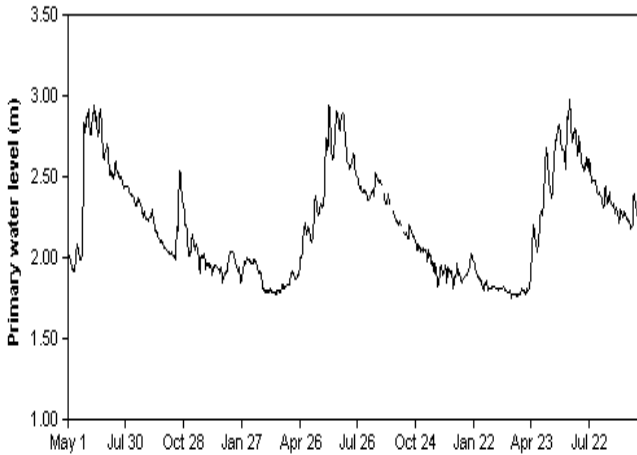
Peter Duck

We have just passed through an interesting series of annual water cycles, moving from drought in 2003 through a reasonably wet summer in 2004 to this year’s series of record setting rainstorms. For us it certainly meant we had a better chance of getting wet while hiking this year than in previous years. But what does this mean for the land?

For the land it means that springs continue to flow stronger into the fall and I’ve heard many stories of springs flowing where they had not been seen before. With these high flows extending into winter it probably means we will see more hanging ice in places such as Johnston Canyon where the amount of hanging ice has been diminishing year by year. There definitely is more water in the land as indicated by the fact that Lake Minnewanka is higher than we have seen it for some time with reports of eroding banks as waves get access to new exposures. The usual fall mud flats around the Vermilion Lakes have yet to reveal themselves to migrating shorebirds although much longer legged Great Blue Herons have been seen stalking the shorelines.

What about the river levels? As impressive as the June rains were they did not seem to unduly affect the height of the Bow River at Banff. The graph shows that the high water this year was only marginally higher than the two previous years. It would seem that the heavy June rain merely compensated for low snow accumulation during the winter. Since the June storms brought moisture from the east the heaviest precipitation was blocked and fell in the Front Ranges. In addition, much of the precipitation fell as snow in the high country of the Banff area. More gradual runoff spared us any notable river flooding west of the Rundle-Cascade boundary while just to the east Cougar Creek gave the railway a run for its money to protect the line. Further east the very front ranges and foothills took the brunt of these rainfall events. So while it seems there is a lot more water, longer, on the land in the mountains we have not been overwhelmed and storage combined with slow release from

springs and snowmelt have given our area a rather normal season on the river.



Relative Bow River water levels from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 to October 11, 2005. Upper and lower dashed lines are arbitrary lines to assist comparing seasonal lows and highs. The middle dashed line is set at the October 11, 2005 level. Lower October levels in the 2003 drought recovered due to a late season heavy rain while current levels are similar to 2004 in spite of what appeared to be a rainy spring and summer season.



The last real flood in Banff. In 1986 the valley west of Banff was essentially one large lake. Picture of Warner's stables surrounded by water.

## Of Wild Things...

### Fierce Competitor or Small Carnivore?

*Peter Duck*

I had read that Red Squirrels will raid songbird nests but this was surprising. While enjoying one of my guiding forays up to C-Level Cirque in early summer my group was halted by the usual spruce grouse on the trail. A squirrel was taking very aggressive runs at the grouse. It seemed as if the squirrel surely would have jumped the grouse had our collective boots and hiking poles not afforded some security for the bird. At least four times this raging rodent ran at the grouse which each time retreated closer towards the apparent security of our group. Eventually the squirrel returned to the darker recesses of its midden and resigned itself to scolding. Was the squirrel intent on grouse stew or simply pushing a perceived competitor away from its territory?

### A True Survivor

*Brenda, Dwayne Lepitzki*

The television reality shows pale in comparison to true life, at times a life and death struggle which humans rarely glimpse or comprehend. This past summer some people saw what most of us only see on nature programs. They spotted a large snake eating a toad along one of the thermal spring outflow streams at the Cave and Basin near the end of June. When we received a phone call we tried to obtain details about exactly what was happening and where the drama was unfolding. The snake, some said the largest they had ever seen and "definitely not" one of the harmless garter snakes common around the C&B, had caught the toad and was trying to swallow it. Film captured the action showing the snake's jaw disarticulated and the toad using its last-resort defence - puffing up itself with air.

After about an hour, the mighty struggle ended with the snake failing to completely engulf the toad but leaving the hind end of the toad apparently paralysed. The snake disappeared and eventually, so did the toad.

We suspected that one of the toads we had frequently seen during our snail surveys - a female judging by its large size - had met its demise. A quick look at the colouration and pattern of warts and bumps on the toad's back in the photos confirmed that it was indeed one of our "regulars". And its predator was just a Wandering Garter Snake, albeit a big one.

Days passed. There was no sign of the toad at its customary haunts, although before this incident we had seen her almost daily. Perhaps she had succumbed to her wounds and the snake's poison. Garter snake venom is mild to humans and generally won't produce a reaction, but it works well for subduing their normal prey and assisting with digestion.

Then one morning, 10 days after the snake-toad encounter, we saw her back at her familiar spot, soaking up some warm water, without any apparent ill effects. We continued to see her regularly, the last time at the end of September, facing both this way and that,

the hind legs not trailing behind her as would be expected if they were paralysed.

While naming individual animals is frowned upon in scientific circles, we christened her “Survivor”.

As for the fate of the snake - did it suffer from the toad’s poison? We will never know. The toad’s counter defense, noxious toxins liberated by the parotid glands, could have caused severe irritations to the snake’s eyes and mouth. That snake may never consider toads on the menu again.



photo: Scott Griffiths

### Loon Havens

Mike McIvor

The last two summers, Parks Canada has instituted a seasonal closure of a small area on the east side of 3<sup>rd</sup> Vermilion Lake to protect nesting Common Loons from disturbance. A similar regime has been in place at Muskrat Bay in Johnson Lake for several years.



Last year, both nesting attempts produced 2 young that people could watch on the lakes, growing from tiny, downy lumps riding on their mother’s back, to adult-sized birds capable of flight. This year, one young loon came off the Muskrat Bay nest, but for some unknown reason, no young survived at 3<sup>rd</sup> Vermilion Lake.

Despite the mixed results from this year’s nests, this management action by Parks Canada is worthwhile and should be continued. We recommended the initial closures because of concerns the sites were vulnerable to disturbance, in some cases, as we saw at Vermilion Lakes, by people who had no idea the nesting birds were there and certainly did not intend to disturb them. With the closures in effect, the loons have a little more space to themselves and visitors can still watch them from the Vermilion Lakes Road or the main trail at Johnson Lake

### Mountain Caribou

Mike McIvor

The spring BVN newsletter carried a brief article about the tiny, vulnerable herd of caribou in Banff National Park. This time we want to draw attention to the caribou of Jasper. There, the population is considerably larger than in Banff but it has undergone a dramatic, worrisome reduction in recent years.

Jasper National Park officials decided to design a Caribou Recovery Plan, an initiative that has yet to be duplicated by park managers in Banff. But when our friends with the Jasper Environmental Association (JEA) asked several caribou biologists to review the plan, the assessments that came back were unfavourable to say the least. Unfortunately, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that while Parks Canada asserts it is a “science-based organization”, too often it is more likely to go out of its way to avoid inconveniencing commercial or recreational interests than to utilize science as a meaningful tool on which to base protection of a species at risk.

You can learn much more about this important issue from the JEA website. And please consider writing a letter to Environment Minister Stephane Dion and Parks Canada CEO Alan Latourelle (see addresses on page 1), urging them to insist on more positive action from their officials in both parks, to protect the mountain caribou.

WEBSITE: [www.jasperenvironmental.org](http://www.jasperenvironmental.org)

### Wetting the Centennial Blanket

Celebration of Alberta’s centennial in Banff this summer begs the question - is Banff in Alberta? Since the Park was established in 1885 and Alberta was established in 1905 it would seem that the land we stand on is in fact federal and always has been perhaps as early as 1877 and the signing of Treaty Seven. Celebrating the Alberta Centennial in Banff is really like celebrating the arrival of an additional tax collector.

*“So consider the frog. The frog has sensed a change, a displacement in the order of life as we know it. We may be responsible, at least in part, for causing the change. And we may be the next to feel it. This story is larger than we can imagine. The facts humble us. The evening silence is spreading. The frog is telling us something. Will we listen?”*  
from: W. Souder. 2000. A plague of frogs: the horrifying true story.