

**BOW VALLEY NATURALISTS
NEWSLETTER, Fall 2011
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PROGRAMS/EVENTS

BVN meetings:

7:30 pm., Banff Seniors Centre.

Wednesday, OCTOBER 26

The Great Divide Survival Guide with Joel Hagen and Nadine Fletcher.

Wednesday, NOVEMBER 23

Living on the Edge: Plants in the Land of Extremes with Dr. Joyce Gould.

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



photo: Amar Athwal

BANFF NATIONAL PARK PLANNING FORUM

Wednesday, Nov. 16, 7 – 9 p.m.

Harkin Hall, Banff Administration Building

Superintendents Pam Veinotte, Banff Field Unit, and Dave McDonough, Lake Louise, Yoho, Kootenay Field Unit, will provide highlights from this past year as they relate to the Banff National Park Management Plan, then host an open question and answer period.

Thursday, Nov. 17, 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Kinnear Centre, The Banff Centre

On Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. we'll roll up our sleeves for a day of discussion and collaboration about ways to enhance the visitor experience of a select group of popular summer and winter trails in Banff National Park in ways that align with the park management plan.

A copy of the management plan is available here:

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/banff/plan/gestion-management.aspx>

This is a timely topic given alpine adventure, and education and learning are listed as two key findings/recommendations in the recently-released Competitive Initiative Report.

Read about the report here:

<http://www.banfflakelouise.com/media-relations/news-releases/industry-leader-and-stakeholder-panel-release-report>

Editor's Note: *This announcement was received from Parks Canada. We have serious misgivings about framing a discussion of trails and visitor experience in the park in the context of competitiveness from a tourism industry perspective.*

ISSUES

Mount Norquay Ski Area

On October 17, Parks Canada released the finalized Site Guidelines for Development and Use that were approved by CEO Alan Latourelle. Given the current direction of park management we were not the slightest bit surprised - although extremely disappointed - to see that aside from minor tinkering these were virtually unchanged from the draft guidelines that had been the subject of public review. Parks Canada has chosen to ignore the vital history of previous planning that was clearly intended to set limits for this ski area and, following the example it set with Marmot Basin in Jasper, has employed the "gain game" as a means to rationalize its decision to open the door for new activities

and expansion. If you think this is a bad decision be sure to let the Banff Field Unit Superintendent and the CEO know.

Brewster Glacier Discovery Walk

This proposed abomination awaits a decision from Parks Canada. According to the Jasper Environmental Association a draft environmental assessment may be released for public review in the not too distant future. We will keep you posted and encourage your response when the time comes.

Wildlife Corridors, Courage and Trails

Karsten Heuer

Back in 1999 a group of biologists and planners working for the Town of Banff, the Town of Canmore, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, the Municipal District of Bighorn, and Banff National Park hammered out a document entitled Wildlife Corridor and Habitat Patch Guidelines for the Bow Valley. The document (published by the Bow Corridor Ecosystem Advisory Group - BCEAG) not only mapped a regional system of corridors and habitat patches for the first time but spelled out exactly how wide/big/flat they needed to be as well as how much vegetative cover they needed to be functional. The document provided much-needed clarity and direction to planners, land managers and developers throughout the region, and went on to receive the Premier of Alberta's Award of Excellence later that same year.

Now, 12 years later, those same guidelines are being reviewed by BCEAG in an effort to update them with the latest science. I had the opportunity to review a draft of that document and had the following comments:

- I am impressed by the level of background information contained within the report (particularly the individual data sheets for each corridor and habitat patch) but don't see the boldness of the original (1999) document in translating that information into further guidelines land managers and prospective developers can follow on the ground. Of particular issue are trail densities: It is clear from this update that designated and undesignated trail densities are excessive in nearly every corridor and habitat patch (e.g. > 3km/km²). The logical step would be to set target densities or thresholds based on studies done in nearby Jasper and Banff national parks (e.g. wolves have been shown to avoid landscapes where trail densities exceed 2.9km/km² in JNP). Disappointingly, the BCEAG document only calls for 'further study.' Meanwhile, more illegal trails are being constructed in corridors and habitat patches every month.

- I was disappointed to see that the corridors and habitat patches that were not mapped back in 1999 (due to lack of data) are still 'unresolved' 12 years later. This update, of all places, is where decisions need to be made and lines finally drawn. Enough science and study has occurred for this to happen; it is merely a matter of political courage and will. The Wind Valley Corridor and its misalignment with the Three Sisters Along Valley Corridor is the most noticeable of the bunch – an almost humorous disconnect that undermines the credibility of the entire document. Similarly, recent analyses have identified a number of un-delineated corridors and habitat patches in the eastern half of the study area (e.g. around Exshaw and Lac des Arcs) that require immediate attention.

BVN members are encouraged to contact their local jurisdiction and ask for a more courageous treatment of these issues in the new, updated BCEAG document. For without wildlife corridors in this busy valley of ours, wildlife will have a hard time surviving.

Consulting Canadians – or NOT?

Peter Duck

There is a legislated requirement to review the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act in the coming months. With ski area long range plans and perhaps other significant projects on the horizon the outcome of this review has implications for local project planning.

Discussion among environmental advocates across Canada indicates that once again the federal government will be inclined to use the review to further weaken this essential planning tool in the name of economic efficiency. Advocates for sound environmental management across the country are extremely concerned. They also struggle to find the capacity to organize a strong voice for environmental planning in Canada since federal funding for public advocacy has been severely limited in recent years and access to traditional public consultation processes has become limited. For example, the Minister's multi-sector Regulatory Advisory Committee for the CEAA was instrumental in making consensus recommendations leading up to the last review of the Act but has not been asked to meet for a few years. Federal funding for the Canadian Environmental Network has also been restricted this year and staff are being laid off this month.

This erosion of participatory democracy in Canada extends beyond environmental issues. The federal government's reluctance to consult with non-government organizations on a range of domestic and international topics is reported to be widespread. Instead, the government is telling us on the news programs that it is consulting "directly" with Canadians. It is hard to determine just exactly what that means. Perhaps it means that meeting directly with

organizations that have both expertise and experience in participating in meaningful consensus-building processes on behalf of their members is no longer considered “Canadian”. Where consultation with the public interest groups and specialists does occur these days the informed input seems to be marginalized. This seems to be the case with the recent recommendations relating to stronger regulation of energy drinks in order to protect children.

The required review of the CEAA is likely to happen during this parliamentary session. This law is intended to ensure that environmental effects and related public accountability are part of the project planning process. However, the CEAA has been subject to constant resistance by government departments and industry interest groups under both Liberal and Conservative led governments. With those powerful influences at play how will the individual Canadians the federal government claims to be listening to find the matching capacity to present meaningful input to the review of the CEAA?

Sustainable Forests, Sustainable Communities
The Future of Alberta’s Southwestern Forests

Editor’s Note: *Our friends with the Alberta Wilderness Association recently approached us about joining them and a number of other organizations in signing on to a document to be sent to Premier Alison Redford, from which the material below is an excerpt. We agreed to do so with enthusiasm.*

Citizens and associations from communities throughout southwestern Alberta have joined together to document serious concerns with current industrial-scale logging practices and present an alternative vision for the management of Alberta’s southwestern forests 1. *There is an urgent need to create an alternative model of forest management in Alberta. We envision a new model, based on ecosystem management, guided by independent scientific expertise and augmented by local community participation and benefit. We are not opposed to all logging. Instead we support the development of a forest management model that maintains healthy forest ecosystems as its primary function, and offers sustainable benefits to communities from the wise use of these forests.*

Priority Recommendations for Sustainable Forest Management

- The first priority of forest management in southwestern Alberta forests will be the conservation of the ecological values of the forest, including provision of clean, abundant water, diverse forest ecosystems, wildlife habitat and connectivity, and natural carbon capture and storage.
- The second priority will be appropriate human use of the same forested landscape, including appropriate

- recreation and tourism, and sustainable forestry.
- Government agencies, in order to serve the public, will better integrate forest, wildlife, watershed and recreation management with clear objectives, monitoring, and transparency.
 - Public consultation processes will be accessible, accountable and transparent.
 - Forest management will be based on the best available, peer-reviewed science. When there is a risk of negative impacts, the precautionary principle must prevail.
 - Management practices will be geared to assist the recovery of species of concern, such as the grizzly bear and native trout.

We call on the Alberta government to change the unsustainable logging plans that are now in place and take action to develop a sustainable forest management model and implement the recommendations above.

1 For the purposes of this document, the southwestern Alberta forests are interpreted as the forested headwaters of the Oldman and Bow Rivers, from the north boundary of Waterton Lakes National Park to a point south of Sundre.

Of Wild Things...

Musings from the road
Colleen Campbell

"The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth."
 "Take only memories, leave only footsteps."
 "If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man."
Chief Se'ahl

These and several other such quotes from a long-ago speech in a native language have been long attributed to Chief Se'ahl. Though there is doubt about the origin of the quotes, the source matters little. They reflect a wisdom about the earth; someone authored them and they are often cited. When we hear one in a presentation we usually nod and briefly ponder our agreement with the sentiment.

I am currently far from home, noticing and enjoying differences in culture, history, food, and simultaneously noticing similarities. A repeating theme is that of our relationship to environment and parts thereof. During the first week and more of my travels I was fortunate to visit with brown bear researchers in Italy. Though I knew from their visit to Canada a few years ago that challenges and concerns for bear researchers in Trentino are comparable to those in the Canadian Rockies, visiting in Italy and learning,

again, about the research in northern Italy stimulated me to think, again, about the importance of education.

While in Italy I was posed two questions: Is it important to have bears, healthy populations of wild bears and how does one convince friends to return to the mountains to hike in places they used to enjoy when they have become afraid of encountering a bear?

In the Dordogne I was taken by a friend to her relative's farm and we spoke, in my rugged French and through my friend's elegant English, about the challenges of running a small family farm (similar to challenges in Canada) and a frustration of protecting the trout ponds, the most vested endeavour on the farm, against a protected species, the 'fish-eating, fish-thieving' great blue heron.

Here in Brittany discussion has been about the importance of uninterrupted trophic relationships in marine habitats. That led to discussion about umbrella species and how grizzly bears as an example are important to the well being and success of other species, plants, birds, insects, mammals, even some of those that occur in wetlands and water.

A day on local French trains with a so-so book made time for me to think about how we target individual species in educational programs because of an apparent problem. Though this approach is important to educate people who are directly affected...by the heron eating the fish, by fear of wildlife, by bears eating apples from orchards or by coyotes, bears or ravens tearing apart garbage left for collection, it is spotty and opportunistic. I think we need a much more long-term approach to teach students everywhere and at all levels in public education - a curriculum that would endure through each for school year. I think there are many topics that could be covered over years of public education that would, with a comprehensive strategy, help us to recover culturally and behaviourally our place in the world.

A global approach could include questions about food and where it comes from, what its value is to us, how we acquire and use resources, what and how and when we build, as well as whether or not and how we enter 'wilderness' and how we live respectfully with other species. Relationship with other subjects could be exploited: history, mathematics, biology, languages, chemistry, physical education. Of course, the program would also have to include discussion about the roles that different species, plant and animal, play in the healthy functioning of ecosystems...in all of which we are participants. It would reconnect us with science and nature...the stuff of life.

I am certain such considerations would stimulate lively debate, but are we not looking for just this very sort of education when we tune into environmental programs, read books about weather change and attend lectures and meetings offered by BVN and other agencies? Does not the potpourri of environmental programs currently offered in

schools generate strong interest? Why not foster a systematic approach within a persistently meaningful context?

It does not matter who first said "The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth." the statement expresses a truth we ought to acknowledge.

HELS Project Report

Mike McIvor

In our Winter newsletter that will come out in January we are planning to provide a summary of the observations of High Elevation Localized Species that have been submitted to our website. In the meantime we want to thank everyone who has contributed your sightings and strongly encourage you to keep them coming.

The Common Barn Swallow declared Threatened by Cosewic

Dr. Dwayne Lepitzki, Ph.D.



photo: Amar Athwal

What does it mean when naturally common species – those that are abundant and widespread – begin to disappear? This was a topic of a scientific meeting hosted by the Zoological Society of London, England, in 2009 and is regaining popularity within conservation biology circles. Kevin Gaston, a Professor of Biodiversity and Conservation at the University of Sheffield, has been working on this issue for several years. He has reached several conclusions: While endangered and threatened species are typically rare in that they usually have small home ranges and/ or restricted distributions, it is the common species that shape the world around us and provide many ecosystem services upon which humans depend. Furthermore, being very common is actually quite rare and declines in common species are widespread. Lastly, abundant and widespread species also become rare and highly restricted on their road to extinction. Gaston provides several examples of profound ecosystem consequences due to the historic depletion of once common

species. Atlantic Cod *Gadus morhua*, Passenger Pigeon *Ectopistes migratorius*, Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus* and Bison *Bison bison* were all once abundant and widespread and helped shape several marine and terrestrial ecosystems in North America. Interestingly, the Bison and the Black-footed Ferret *Mustela nigripes*, a natural and once common predator of the Black-tailed Prairie Dog, are two species that have been or are the current subjects of re-establishment attempts by Parks Canada. Gaston states that naturally common species or dominant species are generally agreed to contribute disproportionately to ecosystem function. Their loss, therefore, could disproportionately lead to ecosystem dis-function. However, the idea that common species can become extinct is not new. Gaston quotes Elton, from 1927, who states “the argument that a common species is in no danger because it is very common is a complete fallacy.” After all, the last Passenger Pigeon died in captivity in Ohio on 1 September 1914. Closer to home, the subject has come to roost (pardon the pun!). At its May Wildlife Species Meeting the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed the Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* as Threatened. “The most widespread swallow species in the world” according to COSEWIC, “is following the pattern of declining trends seen in many migratory birds across North America that eat flying insects”. This species is still commonly found across all provinces and territories except Nunavut, nesting along cliffs, or since European settlement of North America, in barns and other human-built structures. Breeding Bird Surveys show a statistically significant overall decline of 76% in the 40-year period from 1970 to 2009. Over the most recent 10-year period (1999 to 2009), the decline has been 30%, large enough to trigger the Threatened category. The reasons for the decline “continue to baffle bird experts but changes in habitats, insect communities and climate have all been implicated” says COSEWIC.

In our area in 2011, Barn Swallows were observed in a variety of locations including Vermilion Lakes and Lake Minnewanka as well as by participants on the Banff Community Bird Walk at the horse stables towards the Cave and Basin. The Threatened assessment does still offer hope that the species’ decline can be reversed but let us hope it is not on the steady decline to oblivion as has been the case for other once abundant and widespread species.

Three Species Found in Banff Begin Their Status Assessment Journey

Dr. Dwayne Lepitzki, Ph.D.

In addition to assessing or reassessing a total of 40 wildlife species at their latest Wildlife Species Assessment meeting in May 2011, the Committee on the Status of Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) added 15 species to the official COSEWIC Candidate List. This is a list of species that are suspected of being at some risk of extinction (gone forever)

or extirpation (gone from the wilds of Canada). While most of the COSEWIC Candidates have not been previously assessed, some candidates could have been previously assessed as Not at Risk or Data Deficient but new information suggests a change in status may have occurred. Three of those species new to the Candidate List are found for at least portions of their lives in Banff National Park: the Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*), the Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*), and the thermal spring dependent Vivid Dancer damselfly (*Argia vivida*). It won’t be until at least 2014 that these species will be officially assessed, but that journey has begun.



Photo: Michael Shuster

The Belted Kingfisher, Black Swift, and Vivid Dancer join the COSEWIC Candidate Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) as species that spend some time within Banff. Within Banff National Park, Black Swifts are known to occur in Johnston Canyon, and further afield, they are also known from Maligne Canyon in Jasper National Park. Their presence in these canyons is being monitored by knowledgeable naturalists. Breeding by Belted Kingfishers, Black Swifts, and Vivid Dancers is known to occur within park boundaries but of these four COSEWIC Candidates, only the Vivid Dancer is known to spend its entire life within the park. The thermal springs it inhabits in Banff also are the only known locations for the species in Alberta. And just as with the Black Swift, the Vivid Dancer only occurs in Canada in British Columbia and Alberta. Similarities between Black Swifts and Vivid Dancers continue as both are found in high visitor use areas in Banff: the former in Johnston Canyon, the latter at the Cave and Basin, a thermal spring complex that is currently undergoing a major redevelopment with a stated target of tripling visitation to 300,000 per year by 2014 (BNP Management Plan 2009). To get to this stage, each COSEWIC candidate has already navigated through a twisting, mountainous road. Each Species Specialist Subcommittee (SSC) of COSEWIC has its own list of candidates grouped into three categories ranging from lowest to highest priority. Justifications, short blurbs outlining key points that factor into their probability

of extinction or extirpation, are written by species experts and reviewed by other experts. A few of the highest category species from each SSC are then forwarded to COSEWIC members. They scrutinize the justifications and then rank the species. The highest-ranking species then join the COSEWIC Candidate list with the number making the annual cut being determined by time and resources. While the Call for Bids to write the status reports for the Western Grebe will be announced on the COSEWIC web site this fall, the Call for Bids for the three other species won't appear until the fall of 2012. In the meantime, it is expected that information and data gathering will begin as being COSEWIC Candidates should make them eligible for some funding opportunities.

The official COSEWIC Candidate list and justifications are available at cosewic.gc.ca.



Vivid Dancer Damselfly

Photo: Dwayne Lepitzki

Journey to the Mantle of the Earth

Shelley Mardiros

Even on a rainy day, Gros Morne in Newfoundland is a spectacular National Park, and a naturalist's dream. We arrived at the Discovery Centre near Woody Point on a wet July morning this summer and spent an hour in the exhibition hall. Scattered around the hall were whimsical small models of research scientists at work: a geologist with a pick axe, an ornithologist in harness on a cliffside, an archeologist setting up a grid of strings, etc. At each display one could listen to excerpts from an interview with the scientists describing their research in the park. The geologist recalled his first visit to Gros Morne and his excitement at finding samples of everything he'd read in textbooks about rock formation.

His excitement was infectious, so we checked out (no charge!) an electronic gizmo the size of a small notebook – complete with its own transparent rain jacket -- and drove down the road to the trailhead for a 2-km interpretive walk through the unique serpentine barrens of the Tablelands. Our electronic guide – let's call him Woody – was equipped with GPS (so he knew where he was), a pleasant voice, a

screen to display photos or illustrations when they were needed, and a fascinating story about the collision of continents, the birth and death of oceans. We donned our own raincoats to walk the trail as Woody told us that the orange peridotite rock all around us had been thrust up from the mantle of the earth tens of kms below the earth's crust when Pangaea was coming together 500 million years ago. We paused to look at Woody's illustration of plate tectonics. As we walked on, Woody "binged" (his GPS location sensor kicking in) to call our attention to a carnivorous pitcher plant at trailside. The mineral content of the mantle rock is inhospitable except to specialized plants, hence the barrenness of the landscape. The orange of the peridotite is oxidized iron, from exposure to air, but the centre of the rock is dark green-grey. Bing! "See?" Woody tells us – "there at trailside is a split-open rock showing the orange exterior and the dark centre." To walk on an upthrust chunk of the earth's mantle while listening to an explanation of how the continents have formed and are still changing is to experience the wonder of nature on a grand scale – even (maybe especially) when one is surrounded by a chill, damp mist.

It is also magnificent to scramble, as we later did, up to the heights of the Tablelands on a clear day when the peridotite shines in the sunlight, or to hike the "big mound" – Gros Morne mountain – to search for caribou and ptarmigan and familiar alpine wildflowers. In each of these pursuits, we ran into visitors enthusiastic about their experience. A Newfie couple and their 12-year-old son from St. John's were still bubbling with joy about kayaking alongside minke whales in Bonne Bay, a large fjord visible from the Tablelands and from Gros Morne mountain. A family from Ottawa told us up about a nearby boardwalk with interpretive panels illustrating the ecology of the 7-foot-deep peat bog all around it. A sign outside the Visitors' Centre announced human-guided hikes to see wildflowers, birds, and rock formations. What a great National Park.

Strange. It doesn't have zip lines or via ferrata or dragonboat races or celebrity golf games... and nobody mourned their absence.



photo: Michael Shuster