

FALL 2024 NEWSLETTER

BOW VALLEY NATURALISTS

CLICK THE PIC OR TITLE AND JUMP TO A TOPIC THAT INTERESTS YOU

BVN PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Recent Programs and looking forward to more...

NEWS AND ISSUES, UPDATES

- Banff Railway Lands: **Participate**
- Cave and Basin Marsh Draining: Can Impact Assessments be Trusted in Banff National Park?
- Banff Community Plan
- Bow Lake Wetlands Manipulation
- Lake Minnewanka Plan
- FireSmart: Urban Protection Versus Ecosystem Loss?
- Lots of Good People Doing Good Work



Beauty and the beast? This Northwestern Fritillary (*Argynnis hesperis*) rests on invasive thistles in the Middle Springs Natural Area. BVN continues to volunteer to support invasive plant control in Banff National Park. Click-the-pic to see some of our other notes about wild things. *P. Duck Photo.*

DONATIONS & THANKS!

WILD THINGS

The Strange Case of the Stabilimentum
A Fire That Almost Burned Banff?
Step Aside Crossbills
Are We Losing Harlequin Ducks?

WHAT OUR MEMBERS ARE READING, WATCHING, AND LISTENING TO

SHARE NATURE RESPONSIBLY

WHO DO YOU CALL WHEN THINGS ARE AMISS?

CONTACTS – We Know Who to Call

Please let land managers and planners know you want protection for ecosystems. Call them, write them a letter, or drop a note to journalists. If you need help finding contact information, or help understanding a particular issue, please drop us a note and we will help you send a message to the appropriate desk.

ECOSYSTEM EDUCATION & ADVOCACY

1967-2024

BOWVALLEYNATURALISTS.ORG

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

BVN presents programs on natural history and ecosystem management issues. Mark your calendar for 7:30 pm on the fourth Tuesday of every month from October to April. In December the usual presentation is replaced by the annual Christmas Bird Count and potluck supper, where you are also welcome. Recordings of past programs are available on our [Public Programs](#) web page. Please be sure you are registered for our updates to receive notifications of programming information and to register for any online presentations.

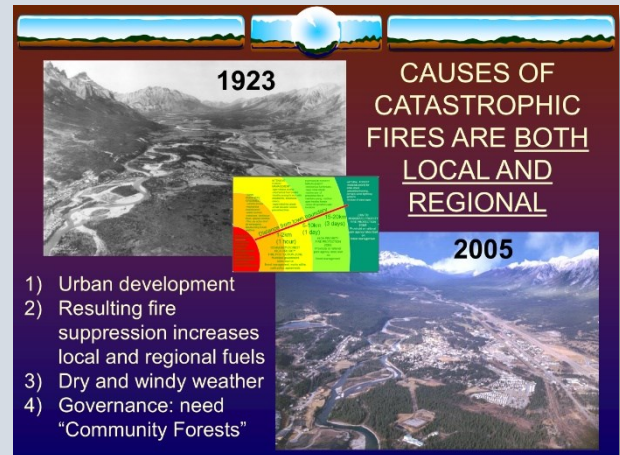
RECENT PROGRAMS

Firesmart In The Canadian Rockies:
Integrating Fire, Vegetation, and Wildlife Outcomes with Cliff White. [Recording.](#)

Historical Perspective on Wild Animals with George Colpitts. [Recording.](#)

49th Christmas Bird Count and Potluck

The Annual Christmas Bird Count was held on Saturday December 14, 2024. The count and potluck supper after the day's observations was the best attended and most fun in a long time. Be sure you are registered for BVN updates to receive further details.



Dr. Cliff Whyte made a compelling case for the idea of community forests in his presentation to BVN last October. *Cliff White graphic.*

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Changes in Mountain Snow, Ice and Water around the World - Local implications and Global Prospects with John Pomeroy

Dr. Pomeroy, among many other distinctions, is the Canada Research Chair in Water Resources and Climate Change and UNESCO Chair in Mountain Water Sustainability. This program will be in-person at the Catherine Whyte Building, opposite the Post Office, in Banff on **Tuesday January 27th, 2025**. [Read Dr. Pomeroy's recent OpEd in the Hill Times](#)

Be sure you are subscribed to our updates to hear more about these events and our February, March and April programs.

NEWS AND ISSUES

The Banff Railway Lands Area Redevelopment Plan – Participate in the Survey!

Please stay tuned for any announcements from Parks Canada about the process for conducting a Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment (SEA) of the Town of Banff's Railway Lands Area Redevelopment Proposal (ARP). This proposal, approved by the Town of Banff and motivated by private commercial interests, is inconsistent with the Town's environmental management plan (EMP). It will further degrade a critical wildlife movement corridor already impeded by the Fenlands recreation facility, require further removal of forest and filling in of a wetland to build a parking lot in the Vermilion Lakes Wetlands Environmentally Sensitive Site (*Banff National Park Management Plan 2020*, page 44). A rare set of landforms that mark the ancient shoreline of Glacial Lake Vermilion which was used by indigenous

ancestors will be destroyed. Implementing this plan will result in further cumulative loss of ecosystem integrity on lands within and adjacent to the Banff Townsite bringing into focus a lack of understanding and commitment to national park values. The sad part of this proposal is that it has gained a large amount of public support based on its ability to promote public transit, especially rail. Instead, the project offers more free parking and does not include any change to rail infrastructure to facilitate increased passenger rail service. The project uses up the last available disturbed land in the townsite for yet another tourist attraction. A much more creative and visionary plan for addressing housing, transportation, and living within the limits of maintaining and restoring Bow Valley ecosystems is required for these lands.



This patch of native aspen forest (*Populus Tremuloides*) in the railway lands is likely the last example of this forest type within Banff Townsite. As an alternative to a bigger free parking lot, the Town could protect this habitat patch consistent with its Environmental Management Plan and transition the adjacent spruce forest into native aspen - popular vegetation type to restore biodiversity achieve fire objectives. *P. Duck Photo.*

The Town of Banff has collaborated with the private developer to develop the ARP but failed to present its residents and Canadians with an independent assessment of alternative ways of using this previously disturbed land to address municipal priorities. Other development

options could include alternative ways to address parking (such as a multilevel parking structure south of the tracks), the Town's housing crisis, the Environmental Management Plan, and address more efficient ways of using undeveloped land within the townsite. When confronted with the ARP conflicting with other directives such as those in the EMP, Town Council was advised to not discuss those conflicts in the public hearing. Here are some relevant actions from the EMP that the ARP proposal should be assessed against:

From Action 3: Increase urban forest diversity (focused on varying ages, sizes and types) within the townsite excluding all species that may act as an animal attractant and/or fire risk.

From Action 4: Prioritize developments that are collaborative, multifunctional (i.e. to conserve biodiversity, to reduce stormwater runoff, to support the green economy, to strengthen community connections etc.) and that integrate both green and grey infrastructure and connections to other green spaces.

From Action 6. Conduct a study to determine the extent and health of wetlands in Banff. Develop a wetland retention, restoration and management plan.

From Action 11. Conduct an impact assessment related to resident and tourist impact on the wildlife corridors near Banff (Fenlands-Indian Grounds, Sulphur and the Golf Course) and work with relevant partners to develop improvement actions and a timeline based on assessment results.

Instead of addressing these actions, the ARP proposal, in contradiction with the recommendations of the recent report on Moving People Sustainably, provides a disincentive to use public transit by cutting yet more trees in the Fenlands wildlife corridor to offer more free private vehicle parking.

We have now heard from the Superintendent that BVN is being invited to provide input to the terms of reference for the Strategic Environmental Assessment of this project. The public can now complete a

survey and engage with Parks Canada on this topic through the [Let's Talk Mountain Parks](#) website. Feel free to contact us to help inform your opinions on this development proposal before completing the survey.

We hope our members will read BVN's concerns that were not addressed by the Town of Banff during the municipal public hearing last April. The primary objective of BVN and other environmental advocacy organizations is to have no new developments north of the railway tracks. This approach will protect biodiversity in the townsite, protect species at risk habitat, save the patch of wetland forest and its rare landforms, and protect the Fenlands wildlife movement corridor rather than mitigate further cumulative impacts on its effectiveness. **Please** help us to ensure these, and concerns of your own, are addressed by writing to Parks Canada, completing the survey, and asking for an open, accountable, and scientifically credible impact assessment process.

[Town of Banff Railway Lands ARP Information page.](#)

[Text of BVN's Verbal Railway Lands Presentation To Council](#)

[Full BVN Submission to the Railway Lands ARP municipal public hearing.](#)

Draining of the Cave And Basin Marsh

A Study in Diligence: Can Environmental Impact Assessments be Trusted?

Harming migratory bird nests is a contravention of the Migratory Birds Convention Act. In early May of 2022 Parks Canada completed an environmental impact assessment and took action to interfere with natural processes that dramatically lowered water levels in the Cave and Basin Marsh in breeding bird nesting season without conducting nesting surveys to see if nests would be harmed. It was well known among local nature enthusiasts at that time that Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) and quite possibly other aquatic bird species had already begun nesting activity in the area, including one nest in the Marsh. Local naturalists were appalled and hoped that Parks Canada would admit that this action was wrong and take action to prevent further similar incidents.

The Impact Assessment Act of Canada (IAAC) generally requires assessment of only a very few of the largest project proposals in Canada. However, Parks Canada, and similar federal authorities with responsibilities on federal land such as Indigenous Services Canada, are required to develop their own impact assessment processes for many medium and small-scale projects. These assessments lead to the authority making a determination of whether or not the project will have significant environmental effects. In making a determination, the federal authority is required by the IAAC to consider indigenous and community knowledge. Parks Canada should be congratulated for having developed an environmental impact process that far exceeds the Canadian impact assessment norm in terms of the number and size of projects reviewed. But can that impact assessment process be trusted?



Cave and Basin Marsh Loop Trail. Parks Canada's has not addressed a long-standing recommendation to resolve user and ecosystem conflicts in this area. Management has focused on discouraging beaver activity while supporting commercial horse use which alternately turns this special visitor experience into the equivalent of a barnyard quagmire or a hazy dust bowl. This perpetuates both trail damage in Bull Trout critical habitat and discourages pedestrians from enjoying the trail which is one of the best local national park experiences available. *P. Duck Photo.*

In Banff National Park impact assessments are conducted on a regular basis for many small and relatively routine projects that do not cause much concern for the general public. Occasionally these assessments review projects that affect wetlands, species at risk, or otherwise sensitive environments where Canadians expect a high standard of diligence in protecting nature. Banff National Park, and especially the Lower Bow Valley, contains many such places. And these special places and special “resources” are faced with ever increasing demands for human use and infrastructure. With such unrelenting stresses at play, public scrutiny of individual federal assessments is warranted.

A recent impact assessment that was thoroughly investigated by BVN shows a stunning lack of scientific diligence and a complete lack public involvement in manipulating a beloved national park experience. This faulty process led to the elimination of natural ecological processes in the Cave and Basin Marsh – birthplace of Canada’s national park system and a wetland designated for Zone I protection in a National Park. The assessment indicated there was an “urgent” need to maintain continued commercial activity should the artificial dam, that has diverted water from the Marsh for decades, fail due to beaver activity and somehow also damage municipal infrastructure 500 metres away at the local recreation grounds and the commercial horse stables. This concern was raised in spite of the fact it is common knowledge that these distant facilities are routinely flooded by the Bow River during high water, regardless of this dam, and the fact that the recreation grounds have been designed to accommodate flooding.

The impact assessment process for this project, and documents obtained by BVN through access to information procedures, show how Parks Canada’s decision process favoured the interests of commercial activity and failed to follow the legislated requirements of the impact assessment process to consider community knowledge. When an alternative solution was available, inaccurate science, faulty guidance documents, improper use of guidance documents, and tampering with impact assessment documents were all used to justify actions that made commercial use of a popular trail a priority over allowing a keystone and iconic native species (beaver) to restore natural processes in what is arguably Canada’s most protected wetland. In doing so the intent, and quite possibly the specific requirements of the Species at Risk Act, the Fisheries Act and the Migratory Birds Convention Act were dismissed in addition to not meeting requirements of the IAAC or Parks Canada’s own guidelines for conducting impact assessment. Those guidelines required a “Detailed Impact Assessment” due to the proposal to manipulate water levels in a wetland. Instead, Parks Canada chose to conduct the lowest level of assessment possible using a “Pre-approved Impact Assessment” written for a different national park in a different ecoregion approved by a different park superintendent.

The result was the draining of Canada’s most protected wetland during migratory bird nesting and species at risk breeding seasons. Ultimately, this led to the expulsion of beaver activity that was returning to the Marsh after a long absence. Parks Canada last removed a beaver dam in the same location in the late 1980s and it had taken decades for beaver to attempt returning to the Marsh. So much for restoration and maintenance of ecological process being the first priorities of the Minister in managing national parks.

One of the more astounding stranger-than-fiction revelations of our investigation into this tragic event involved the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) who have jurisdiction for protecting fish habitat in Canada, including within national parks. The Fisheries Act is one of Canada's oldest and most important environmental laws which specifies that there can be no *"harmful alteration, disruption, or destruction of fish habitat"* (HADD) unless a permit is issued by DFO or unless specific guidelines are followed and associated with a notification to DFO. The guidelines do not apply when, as in this case, critical habitat for aquatic species at risk is involved. No permit was requested by Parks Canada in this case and no notification for use of the guidelines was uncovered in our investigation of the incident. When a fisheries officer was shown pictures of the drained marsh and, at their request, pictures of dead fish, they refused to investigate based on insufficient evidence that fish habitat had been disturbed. Remarkably, this

suggests that DFO does not think that water is an essential component of fish habitat. Nor do they think that their own map for identifying and protecting species at risk is worth the paper it's printed on.

We could also discuss Banff National Park's laughable identification of Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) as an important breeding species in the Cave and Basin Marsh contrary to the Parks Canada's checklist of birds in Banff National Park and the fact that the breeding range for this species is about 1500 kilometers farther north. The project did not follow the design specifications provided in the impact assessment, and the permit for the project was issued by the Superintendent in a flurry of emails just hours before a deadline for completing the project to avoid disturbing breeding activity. Work continued on the project after the deadline for its completion with no modification of the permit or the impact assessment.

BVN has other serious concerns about the impact assessment process in national parks. For example, Parks Canada posts a thirty-day notice of impact assessments for public comment but only provides copies of the impact assessment document at its discretion. We have been told that Parks Canada does not share impact assessment documents unless the assessment is conducted at the level of a "Detailed Impact Assessment". The thirty-day clock on public input starts ticking regardless of whether Parks has provided a copy of the impact assessment for the public to review. It is up to the public to discover that a project proposal is being considered and then request documents in hopes they may be provided and the comment period extended. There is even an example of local media being told they are not entitled to an impact assessment document. When we have contacted the compliance office of the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada by email with concerns about Parks Canada's impact assessment process they have referred us back to Parks Canada.



Cave and Basin Marsh on September 1, 2024 showing the dead willows that remain following Parks Canada's draining of the marsh to support human use in mid-May 2022. Beaver abandoned the wetland denying Park visitors a rare opportunity to experience this iconic keystone species and its important role in the landscape. Guides from the commercial horse ride operation are often heard explaining (wrongly) that beavers ruined the ecosystem through flooding rather than Parks Canada's ill-conceived draining project. *P. Duck Photo.*

While investigating the Marsh draining incident BVN and other witnesses had just wished that someone in government would have had the integrity to admit their mistakes. This did not happen and this experience in combination with DFO's response, and a similar response from Environment and Climate Change Canada regarding an inquiry about an infraction of the Migratory Birds Convention Act, clearly show that the public have no status or government support in advocating for protection of ecosystems when impact assessments go off the rails. Even worse, this documentation sends a message to non-government entities that disturb ecosystems. The public is unable to ensure that environmental regulations are enforced.

Does this put into question Parks Canada's credibility in running an accountable scientific process for assessing the environmental impacts of other projects? There is certainly cause for public concern. With the important strategic assessment of the proposed development of Banff railway lands on our door step, defenders of the Minister's legislated mandate to maintain and restore ecological processes in national parks will need to ensure there is firm public pressure to step up government diligence to counter the ecosystem stresses caused by municipal and commercial interests.

Banff Community Plan

BVN participated as the environmental sector representative on the Town of Banff Community Plan Advisory Committee. The review of the plan is entering its later stages and an opportunity for public comment on a draft of the revised community plan is likely to occur this winter. It is important that this plan is creative in finding ways for economic, social and environmental values to interact in a way that promotes a healthy community and defines Banff as a “National Park town” and not just a town inconvenienced by being in a national park. BVN remains concerned that the outdated traditional economics that have reigned over many of the social and environmental problems the community faces are being given priority. Please watch for an opportunity to arise for public input and contact us if you would like a more detailed progress report. Information on the community plan review process may be found on the [Town of Banff website](#).

Bow Lake Lodge Redevelopment

BVN has been following the environmental impact assessment of the commercial redevelopment at Bow Lake. We shared some concerns about how wetland habitats surrounding and within the lodge redevelopment area as well as the very busy parking area are being protected. It was disappointing to see that the impact assessment of the lodge redevelopment did not address flooding of the commercial lease or the adjacent parking area in spite of the fact that the development is surrounded by wetlands and there is evidence of past attempts by Parks Canada to regulate water levels and prevent flooding caused by beaver activity.

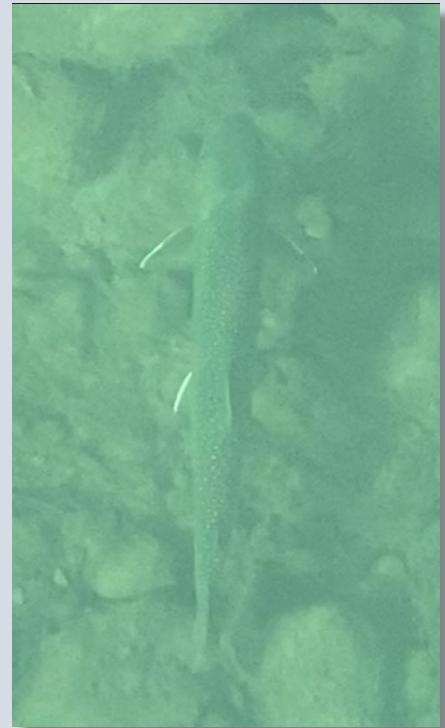
This busy site is another location, like the Cave and Basin Marsh and locations along the railway, where wetlands influenced by beaver dams are being manipulated in favour of human activity. BVN was very frustrated to discover that the Cave and Basin Marsh with all of its direct ecological and hydrological connections to the Bow River, including production of food items, was not considered critical habitat for aquatic species at risk by Parks Canada even though it appears as aquatic critical habitat in DFO mapping. While the critical habitat for aquatic species at risk, such as the Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) have not yet been defined for Bow Lake, it is obvious that connected wetlands likely play a role in nutrient flows and food item production for fish in the lake.

BVN has since encouraged Parks Canada staff to think beyond the thirty-metre buffer zone for defining critical habitat for aquatic species listed under the Species At Risk Act. We hope that ecological criteria are used to protect critical habitat and to include directly connected wetlands such as the Bow Lake wetlands.

Thanks to Noel Summers in the Lake Louise, Yoho, Kootenay Field Unit impact assessment shop for her patience in explaining to BVN how wetlands were being considered at Bow Lake.

Lake Minnewanka Plan

BVN recently met with Banff National Park staff to discuss work on the Lake Minnewanka Area Plan. Although still very early in the planning process, it was a productive meeting and BVN was grateful for the



Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) seen from the Bow River pedestrian Bridge. Large schools of Mountain Whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*) are also visible from the bridge when the water is clear. Wildlife viewing opportunities in the heart of the townsite show that Banff is not just a town in a national park, it is a National Park Town. P. Duck Photo.

opportunity to spend quality time with Park planners early in the process to discuss our ideas for this very special part of the Park.

BVN has indicated to Parks Canada that the Minnewanka Area Plan should be consistent with, and build upon, the 1996 Banff Bow Valley Study. That expert panel came to the following conclusion:

“Our understanding is incomplete. For this reason, we must be cautious in making any decision to allow more people, facilities, activities and services. We must exercise the principles of precaution. If we are not sure a proposed development will preserve, or even enhance, ecological integrity, we must err on the side of caution. We must postpone making decisions that could harm the environment until we do know, until we are sure.”

Banff-Bow Valley At The Crossroads: Summary Report, 1996

Since that time, the airstrip was closed, the cadet camp was removed, a closure is in place along the Fairholme Range, a seasonal vehicle closure is applied on the Minnewanka loop and a wildlife overpass has been constructed across the canal. It would be a shame to compromise these commitments the community made to ecological integrity as a result of this cooperative work. Assuming we should accommodate increased demand for human use is contrary to the recommendation of this study, particularly its strong emphasis on principles of precaution, unless strong science can be tabled in the new plan that shows our understanding has been improved.

Some may say this study, which was ahead of its time as a strategic regional assessment that engaged the community, is outdated. That may be the case. If so, then it is a valuable recommendation of the Minnewanka planning process that Parks Canada and the community once again engage in an updated regional environmental impact assessment of human activity and infrastructure in the Banff Bow Valley. This work be a foundation for any further planning. Regional studies such as the recent, narrowly focused, moving people sustainably initiative, which did not include ecosystem science expertise on the panel, cannot be allowed to stand alone and set the priority for town or park planning.

FireSmart - Urban Protection Versus Ecosystem Loss?

Following the urban fire disaster in Jasper National Park this summer there is renewed awareness that the Town of Banff has been lucky in dodging the same fate. Long-term Banff residents may remember the ignition on the Bow Valley end of the Sundance range several years ago and the fire on the Bow Valley side of Mount Norquay. More recently, there was the escaped prescribed fire just north of the townsite two years ago. This warning of catastrophe has been written in flames on the valley's walls for centuries. A quick review of Cliff White's book *Wildland Fires in Banff National Park 1880 - 1980* can reveal about 12 other wildfire ignitions in the lands adjacent to Banff townsite. In a worst-case scenario, any one of these ignitions likely had potential to transition from wildfire into a disastrous urban structural fire event.

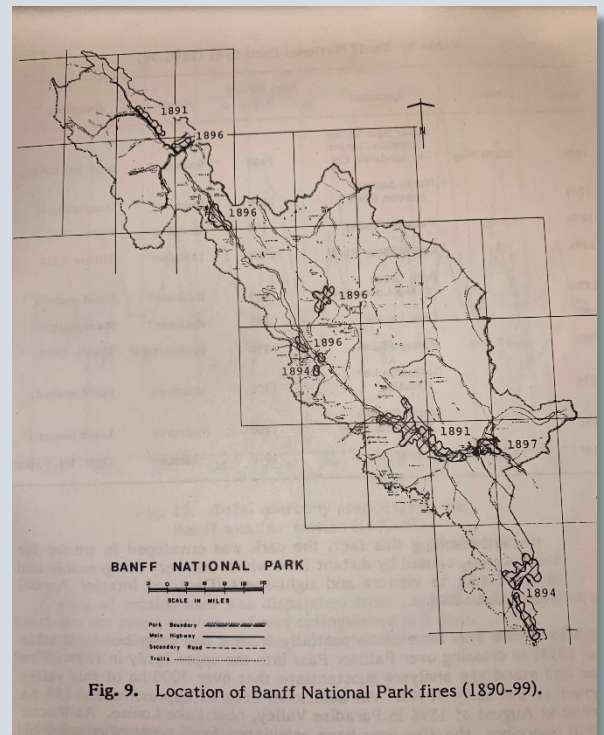


Fig. 9. Location of Banff National Park fires (1890-99).

This image is from *Wildland Fires in Banff National Park 1880 - 1980* by Cliff Whyte(1985). Zoom in and note the 1891 fire that came down the Bow Valley from the base of Vermilion Pass at Castle junction to approach Banff town site.

The renewed impetus to address this obvious risk in the context of what we are learning about modern wildfire behaviour is creating a need to modify even more large areas of land (ecosystems) outside of the townsite to be as ready as we can for this risk. The town must be protected. But at what cost to ecosystems?

The existing and proposed footprint of vegetation and water regime manipulation for protection of Banff townsite vastly exceeds the footprint of the townsite. We are committing huge areas of land to a perpetual state of vegetation succession that suits our human needs. This commitment is on top of the current idea that areas of land within and beyond the town boundary should be committed to more parking lots to manage congestion within the townsite. These solutions can be in direct contrast to the legislated national parks mandate to maintain and restore natural processes, including water regimes and the succession of vegetation communities. Conflicts with the Town of Banff's Environmental Management Plan to preserve forests and enhance biodiversity are also a concern.

These are not easy conflicts to resolve. The BVN directors will be doing our best, within our limited capacity, to ensure that addressing these problems respect ecological integrity both within and beyond the town boundary. We hope our members will reinforce our efforts and do the same.

Lots of Good People Doing Good Work For Ecosystem Protection

Learn about other important ecosystem protection topics from organizations that are also active in protecting the Bow Valley and surrounding region.

[Alberta Wilderness Association](#)
[Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative](#)
[Ecojustice](#)

[Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society](#)
[Wildsight](#)
[Bow Valley Engage](#)

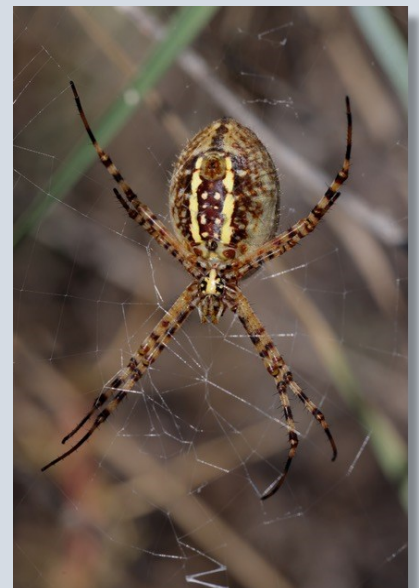
DONATIONS & THANKS!

BVN is grateful for the numerous donations that allow us to do the things we do. Funds we receive pay for ongoing administrative expenses such as website maintenance, support for our program series expenses, and MAPS operational expenses. These donations also allow us to pool funds to support other individuals, projects and organizations. All BVN's routine advocacy and administrative tasks, including Board activities, the annual Christmas Bird Count and preparing the newsletter, are done by volunteers. Please use the donation button at the bottom of our web pages if you wish to support the work we do.

WILDTHINGS

The Strange Case of the Stabilimentum *Submitted by Noel Begin*

I spent a month in the valley outside of Drumheller, half way up the road to Wayne, and one day happened upon a garden spider walking along. The next day the spider had made a web, and the characteristic, albeit fledgling, stabilimentum. A stabilimentum (plural: stabilimenta), also known as a web decoration, is a conspicuous silk structure included in the webs of some species of orb-web spider. Its function, according to Wikipedia, is a subject of debate.



I decided to visit every day and see how things progressed. From what I can find, there's a lot of speculation about the purpose of the stabilimentum, and it seems like most encounters are based on a single visit so I tried to observe the way this spider built and modified it over time. I had my pretty awesome macro lens with me, and so I took photos for most of a week before having to return to Calgary. I'm developing my own notions of how the stabilimentum benefits the spider.

(Noel Begin is an artist in Calgary who specializes in close up photography. In addition to this beautiful image, you can see his awesome video of the Banff Springs Snail close up at the Cave & Basin National Historic Site.)

Editor's Note: In discussing Banded Garden Spiders (*Argiope trifasciata*) [iNaturalist offers](#) this insight:

"The silk decorations of Argiope spiders are thought of as visual signals by researchers. Even though the purpose behind the silk decorations made by Argiope trifasciata remains uncertain, there are a few hypotheses: to make the spider appear larger and to act as a warning sign. It has been shown that webs containing stabilimenta catch fewer insects because they are less cryptic, but on the other hand these webs are less often damaged by birds flying through them."

A Fire That Almost Got Banff

This picture shows one of many burnt Douglas Fir stumps at the toe of Sulphur Mountain above the junction of Sundance Road and the Cave and Basin Marsh Loop. It tells a story of a time when this north facing slope supported a different, perhaps more open forest community than the dense pine and spruce forest which now dominate this site. Numerous sawed-off stumps here suggest that Douglas Fir were harvested from this site many years ago, perhaps for buildings in Banff townsite. The burnt stump also tells a story about a wildfire that came very close to the area now occupied by Banff Townsite. A fire that we are now very concerned may be repeated. Was this the 1891 fire mentioned above? *P. Duck Photo*



Step Aside Crossbills!

We think of Crossbills and Squirrels as the ones who feed on the seeds in spruce cones. But there is another critter out there that takes advantage of this sometimes abundant food source. This is the Western Conifer Seed Bug (*Leptoglossus occidentalis*). According to [Bug Guide](#) this insect feeds on the sap from green cones as well as twigs, and seeds of Spruce, Pine, and Fir. These common insects move up the trees in spring and summer to feed and lay eggs on the needles of the host. It is sometimes referred to as belonging to a group known as the leaf-footed bugs due to the flattened extension on the hind legs. PennState Extension has included some interesting [pictures of this common insect](#) including nymphs feeding on a developing cone. *P. Duck Photo*



Are We Losing Harlequin Ducks?

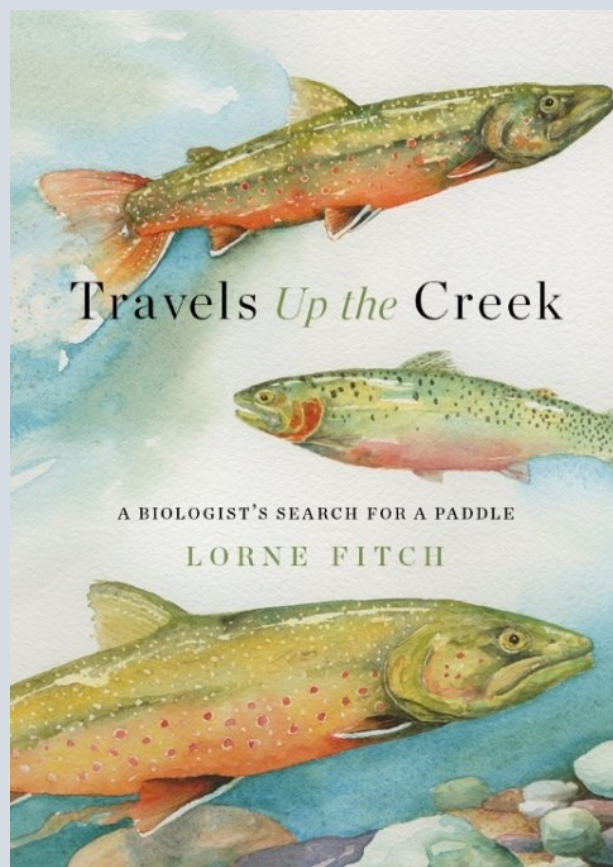
A study published in *Canadian Field Naturalist* in 2023 suggests that the number of Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) using the Bow River between Lake Louise and Castle Junction in Banff National Park is declining. The authors of the study find this decline to be troubling because it appears to be happening in a protected area. Data indicating a decline is similar to data for other mountain areas and the coastal wintering areas. This similarity in trends may indicate that the decline is not necessarily tied to what is affecting the birds on our local breeding streams. The full report may be found by following up on the reference below. That link and more information on “Harleys” is also available on the [BVN website](#).

Declining Population of Harlequin Duck (Histrionicus histrionicus) on the Bow River, Alberta, Canada: 25 Years of Monitoring. Cyndi M. Smith, Brenda Shepherd, Mark Bradley, and Shelley Humphries. [Canadian Field-Naturalist 137\(4\): 358–366.](#)

MEMBERS READ, WATCH, AND LISTEN

For update articles on Mountain Pine Beetle, White Bark Pine and a brief look at insect intelligence take a look at the recent [Bugs and Diseases Newsletter](#) from the Government of Alberta Forest Health team.

Lorne Fitch has written another wonderful nature piece. According to the promotional material the book is “A new collection of essays that will engage readers, inspire change, raise awareness, nurture empathy, and reshape perspectives on environmental stewardship towards a sustainable future.” For those who know Lorne’s work this will be another journey full of insights that attract us to his writing. For new readers, this is a first step in exploring the work of one of Alberta’s most respected naturalists and advocates for ecosystem protection. *Travels Up The Creek* is available through Rocky Mountain Books.



RESPONSIBLE NATURE WATCHING

BVN cautions all readers to not use publicly accessible social media style applications to post the locations of sensitive natural features, plants or wildlife that will attract people to that location. It's good to know nature is out there but in these days of social media such sharing of sensitive information will put the nature we love at risk of being loved too much.

WHO DO YOU CALL?

You may come across situations or observations that you want to tell the authorities about. We recommend you have these phone numbers handy. Remember, cell phone coverage is spotty in the mountains so take notes if you need to move on to make a call.

For Emergencies such as Ambulance, Fire Department, Police (RCMP): 911

Banff Dispatch: 403-762-4506 for Park-related emergency only (avalanche, forest fire, mountain rescue, etc.)

Banff Park **Non-emergency**: 403-762-1470, (bear or large carnivore sightings, human-wildlife conflicts, injured animal, illegal park activities such as fire, feeding wildlife, camping, drones etc.)

Kananaskis: Call 310-5263 for bear, cougar and problem wildlife sightings, illegal activities or to help report damage to public land, noise complaints and general land-related inquiries and information requests. To report a poacher, call 1-800-642-3800 or fill out an [on-line report](#). If you wish to remain anonymous while reporting a crime, phone 1-800-222-TIPS (8477).