

OPERATION

GRASSLAND
COMMUNITY

PRAIRIE ACRES

NEWS FOR ALBERTA'S LAND STEWARDS

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Conservation Easements Questions and Answers
- Passion/Legacy for Educating Children Lives On
- Off-site Watering System and Cattle Oilers Pay for Themselves!
- Sprague's Pipit: Goldilocks Of The Grasslands

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By Don Watson

Albertans are fortunate to possess some of the richest natural resource heritage in North America; open expanses of native prairie grasslands and parklands, scenic foothills and river valleys punctuated by our Rocky Mountains to the west. These are places we cherish as places to live, work and play. These areas also possess high biodiversity and are home to our wildlife resources in which we all share a role in stewardship and conservation.

New opportunities for landowners to conserve a natural legacy

Private landowners in Alberta have made an important contribution to conservation of wildlife habitat through their own stewardship and management but there are new opportunities for private landowners to participate in conserving a natural legacy. They are legal agreements called conservation easements.

What are Conservation Easements?

Since 1996 the *Alberta Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* now makes it possible for landowners to conserve the natural legacy of their lands for all time through the use of Conservation Easements or CE's.

- A legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization.
- Provides the means to conserve an area of land, in perpetuity.
- The agreement runs with the land so that the natural values conserved through the agreement will endure regardless who owns the land in the future.

Qualified Alberta organizations include conservation charities and federal, provincial and municipal agencies (e.g., Alberta Fish and Game Association, Nature Conservancy of Canada, and Ducks Unlimited Canada). In all, there are currently twelve such land trusts and one public land trust operating in Alberta (for more information on these trusts see Alberta Land Trust Alliance information at the end of this article).

Conservation Easements: FACT and FICTION

Many Albertans have questions about the consequences of entering into a CE agreement.

Fiction: A landowner will not have any rights and privileges related to ownership once a CE agreement is entered into.

Fact: The landowner shall retain all rights and privileges not specified in the agreement and shall be responsible for all taxes and obligations associated with ownership.

Fiction: Landowners will lose control of the public's access to his or her land.

Fact: The landowner maintains control of public access to the property. The land trust is typically granted access to the property for purposes related to the agreement.

Fiction: Because landowners are entitled to some federal tax benefits, the public should be given access to the property protected by conservation easements.

Fact: Conservation easements do not mean properties are opened up to public access . Landowners who place conservation easements on their land are providing substantial benefits to all taxpayers, simply by providing the benefit of keeping land in open spaces for scenic vistas and in working land uses, such as farming and ranching.

Fiction: Land use should not be restricted through a conservation easement beyond the present generation, because it takes land-use prerogatives away from future landowners.

Fact: Landowners voluntarily agree to place certain development restrictions on their land through conservation easements because they want to fulfill a specific vision for their land. This is really not different from developers building housing tracts in pursuit of other goals.

Fiction: The terms and conditions of a Conservation Easement cannot be amended by the landowner once the agreement has been entered into.

Fact: A conservation easement may be amended by mutual consent of the landowners and the conservation organization.

For more information on Conservation Easements, please visit: Alberta Land Trust Alliance at www.landtrusts-alberta.ca
Also: Canadian Wildlife Service, Ecological Gifts Program at www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/egp-pde/

Alternatively, you may contact your OGC representative and they will assist you and refer you to an appropriate qualified organization.

PASSION/LEGACY FOR EDUCATING CHILDREN LIVES ON

When Nancy and Roger Schnoor moved from Lethbridge in 1979 to their farm in the New Dayton area to raise cattle and produce grain and specialty crops, Nancy had no idea how her life would change by planting numerous trees and shrubs in their yard (spruce, mayday, elm, lilac, silver leaved poplar, willow and thorny buffaloberry). Once the trees and shrubs were established, an array of birds started foraging and nesting in their yard. Nancy began to take an interest in watching and identifying her avian neighbours, which provided a source of intrigue and entertainment.

To Nancy's delight, the science department added a bird unit to its curriculum. As a grade one teacher at the Milk River School, Nancy's interest in bird watching developed into a passion as she transformed the general bird unit requirement into a hands-on-learning experience for the children with storytelling, nature walks and field trips. Among her favourite stories were the Cow Bird and how it lays its eggs in the Yellow Warbler's nest,

the Loggerhead Shrike (LOSH) aka "the butcher bird" and its hallmark of impaling prey (insects, small birds, mammals and snakes) on barbed wire, and the Killdeer performing its broken wing act to lure intruders away from its nest. The children enjoyed local nature walks through the town of Milk River as well as adventures to Writing on Stone Provincial Park and the Schnoor's family farm.

Although Nancy has retired from her formal teaching position, her legacy to educate children about birds and nature lives on, as she actively looks for birds with her two grandsons (Nathan and Owen) at home on the farm and when she visits her other three grandchildren (Jordan, James and Jacie) who presently reside in Saskatchewan.

Nancy and Roger have been OGC members since 1993 and permitted OGC (then Operation Burrowing Owl) to film Burrowing Owls (BUOW) occupying their native grasslands in the early 1990's for an education and awareness video. During a LOSH Management Plan Revisit this June, Nancy and her two grandsons, Nathan (8) and Owen (5), had the unexpected pleasure of meeting Napi, a captive born BUOW from the captive breeding facility in Kamloops (Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC). Helen and Phil Trefry recently cared for Napi. Napi was also the centre of attention at the Ladies Livestock Lessons held this year at Pine Lake and the Who Gives a Hoot about Native Grasslands event at the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area.



Nancy with Grandson's Owen (5) and Nathan (8) and Napi, one of Canada's most Endangered Species

Nancy summarized her thoughts on species at risk and conservation organizations such as OGC as "wonderful to keep our birds alive for all to enjoy forever."

Thank you Nancy for your appreciation of birds and passion to continue educating the next generating of bird watchers!

OFF-SITE WATERING SYSTEM AND CATTLE OILERS PAY FOR THEMSELVES!

Simon Mandel, Pasture Manager of 23 years for Acadia Hutterite Brethren, experienced firsthand this year, the benefits of two OGC Burrowing Owl (BUOW) Habitat Enhancement Projects (HEPs) and a Species at Risk Conservation (SARC) Plan.

Off-site Watering System (OWS) and Fenced Dugout

Simon was very pleased with Promold's wind and solar powered OWS that he incorporated into his complementary and deferred-rotational grazing management plan that was used in four different pastures this year. Simon noted that for every two cows using a dugout, thirty cows used the OWS.

Foot rot is a common disease in the area and this year was exceptionally bad with the extremely high precipitation. Simon's most significant observation with the OWS was the cattle that had the option to use the OWS did not develop foot rot, whereas the cattle that did not have the option to use the OWS did develop foot rot.

Without catch pens in the pastures and the unusually tall grass this year, catching cattle to treat them for foot rot becomes very costly, as it is very inconvenient and time consuming. The money saved by the cattle that did not develop foot rot paid for the OWS in one year. Cattle without disease, such as foot rot, had better weight gains resulting in overall herd health which, in turn, increased the bottom line. Simon noted this was a very good year to have the OWS and would like to purchase another unit in the future.

Simon also fenced one of his dugouts in excess of the required 30 M buffer to include more of lower lying area. Fencing off the dugout not only preserves the integrity of the dugout, it provides cleaner water for the cattle, which can increase cattle productivity by 20 percent. The fenced buffer zone allows the enclosed vegetation to recover from grazing and trampling. This protected area of taller vegetation will provide habitat for small mammals such as voles and mice – the owl's most important food source.

Cattle Oilers

Biting flies can cause significant economical losses in the cattle industry, as they are a major pest that can cause weight loss in cattle by disrupting feeding behaviours. Cattle will attempt to dislodge biting flies with foot stamping, tail switching and by throwing their heads down toward their front legs and/or bunch up instead of spending time grazing, resulting in a lot of wasted energy.

Not every cow will use the oilers; however, if even half the cows use the oilers, the biting flies will be controlled. These biting flies are particularly attracted to the bulls, so if only the bulls use the oiler the biting flies can still be controlled.

Since the cattle really liked Promold's cattle oilers, Simon's biting fly problem was significantly reduced and the oilers paid for themselves in one year. Less energy expended fighting off biting flies resulted in better weight gains and overall herd health which, in turn, resulted in an increased bottom line.



Simon with Simon Jr. strategically place a cattle oiler to manage small areas of grass with short vegetation

and the wildlife and species at risk.

Species at Risk Conservation (SARC) Plan:

Simon was already applying a number of the Beneficial Management Practices (BMP) that were included in his SARC Plan. Review of the Plan reinforced that he is doing the best thing for the land

and the wildlife and species at risk. One new enhancement technique Simon learned was the strategic use of cattle oilers and salt to manage small areas of grass with short vegetation. This technique helps create heterogeneous grass heights across the landscape for BUOW and other grassland bird species. These areas of short grass can increase:

- future selection by owls for nesting and roosting.
- use by ground squirrels and badgers.
- insect foraging opportunities for nesting BUOWs.

Simon hopes to be eligible for more OGC HEPs in the future.

Simon's philosophy on Stewardship and Conservation is to do what is best for the land and try to leave it in better shape than when you got it - when the wildlife benefit from those practices, it's a bonus.

SPRAGUE'S PIPIT: GOLDBLOCKS OF THE GRASSLANDS



Have you ever wondered what in the world is making those ethereal, slurred, descending, "zeer, zeer, zeer, zeer, zeer" notes high in the clear blue June sky while you're out checking cattle, riding on horseback, or even taking a coffee break on your tail-gate?

That's the song of the male Sprague's Pipit, a small, sparrow-sized ground-nesting songbird defending his

territory with the hopes that his mate will successfully raise her brood. This secretive prairie song-bird is so camouflaged in a dull brown, buff, and white striped plumage, it blends right in with its natural grassland habitat and is tough to spot on land. If you're lucky enough to see a pipit, you'll recognize the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

distinctive contrasting white and brown inner tail feather pattern, most noticeable during flight, a “necklace” of brown striping on the upper breast, a relatively thin bill, and large brown eyes. The easiest way is to know if you have this secretive songbird on your property is to use your ears and look up above you in the sky. From mid-May until early August, listen for the male singing up to 100m (330 ft) in the air! In fact, when you are out on the open prairies, the Sprague’s Pipit is the only song-bird you will hear singing above your head!

Not only does the Sprague’s Pipit have a unique breeding song, it is also very picky with where it nests. Sprague’s Pipits do best in large blocks (> 160 acres) native mixed-grass prairie of moderate height with little or no woody vegetation. They are rarely found on cultivated lands, or native prairie that has been replaced by planted forage species. They will sometimes use older, established tame pastures or hayland. Nests are usually found at the base of a tussock of grass and are made up of a woven cup of dry grasses, partially or completely covered in a dome of woven grasses. Sprague’s Pipit is the Goldilocks of the grassland birds: they depend on healthy pasture that’s not over-grazed, not under-grazed, but “just right”!



Sprague’s Pipits: A Bird In Trouble

Unfortunately, the large tracts of healthy prairie that Sprague’s Pipits need to survive are not as common in Prairie Canada as they once were prior to colonization. About 75% of the original natural grassland on the Canadian prairies has been lost to cultivation. Hence, the area of suitable habitat and the number of pipits has been greatly reduced. Because the current numbers of breeding Sprague’s Pipits in Canada is less than 40% of the population 30 years ago, they are designated as a threatened species. This means it is likely



to become endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors contributing to its decline.

Helping Sprague’s Pipits Helps You!

Fortunately, the things that can help Sprague’s Pipits are also compatible with sustainable range management. Here are 5 land management options you can consider incorporating into your own operation:

1. Retain All Native Prairie (especially areas larger than a quarter section).
2. Graze at Stocking Rates Recommended For Your Soil Zone
3. Reduce or Remove Woody or Exotic/Invasive Species (pipits avoid pastures with lots of shrubs/woody plants, and also avoid pastures with tall and/or introduced forages).
4. Delay Harvesting Hay until after the breeding season (3rd week in July).
5. Avoid Using Pesticides (birds may be poisoned by ingesting Grasshoppers and other insects that have been sprayed).

Operation Grassland Community is committed to promoting sustainable agricultural activities that benefit species at risk like the Sprague’s Pipit. OGC can cost-share with qualified participants to install cross-fencing as part of a rotational grazing system.

BURROWING OWL AND LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE CENSUS PARTICIPANTS: PLEASE ACCEPT OUR APOLOGIES FOR RECEIVING POSTCARDS SO LATE!!! Due to a major error, our original mail-out (sent, we thought, in early July 2010), was actually lost in the mailing process, and, once found, was actually sent late September. Thanks so much for your patience with this error!

CONGRATULATIONS!

We are pleased to announce the 3 members receiving cash prizes for their prompt census card returns:
1st prize (\$300): Tracy Fullerton; 2nd prize (\$150): Don Quast; 3rd Prize (\$75): Greg Cole

Thanks to our Financial Supporters 2010-2011:

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