

# Nature Alberta

ALBERTA'S NATURAL HISTORY REVIEW



**FALSE DANDELION ON SLOPES OF MT. ALLAN, KANANASKIS** BONNIE MULLIN  
PHOTOGRAPHED JULY, 2006

*feature article*

## The Beautiful Uplands

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**CALYPSO ORCHID, PINK FORM IN THE  
FOOTHILLS WEST OF CALGARY**  
IAN GARDINER

PHOTOGRAPHED IN MAY 2000 USING A NIKON F3HP CAMERA,  
28MM NIKKOR LENS, FUJI VELVIA 50 FILM



**STEMLESS LADY'S SLIPPER,  
NORTH OF FORT MCMURRAY**  
DAWN HALL

PHOTOGRAPHED IN JUNE 2006 USING A PANASONIC  
LUMIX DMC – LS2 DIGITAL CAMERA



**YELLOW LADY'S SLIPPER NORTH OF  
FORT MCMURRAY**  
DAWN HALL

PHOTOGRAPHED IN JUNE 2006 USING A PANASONIC  
LUMIX DMC – LS2 DIGITAL CAMERA

*Striving to be the premier voice of naturalists  
around the province!*

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## WANT TO SUBMIT ARTICLES OR PHOTOS?

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## NATURE ALBERTA DEADLINES ARE:

SPRING ISSUE.**FEBRUARY 14**  
SUMMER ISSUE.**MAY 15**  
FALL ISSUE.**AUGUST 15**  
WINTER ISSUE.**NOVEMBER 15**

The Federation of Alberta Naturalists is composed of natural history clubs from across the province. The aims of the Federation are:

- (a) To encourage among all Albertans, by all means possible, an increase in their knowledge of natural history and understanding of ecological processes;
- (b) To promote an increase in the exchange of information and views among natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- (c) To foster and assist in the formation of additional natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- (d) To promote the establishment of natural areas and nature reserves, to conserve and protect species, communities or other features of interest;
- (e) To organize, or coordinate symposia, conferences, field meetings, nature camps, research and other activities whether of a similar or dissimilar nature;
- (f) To provide the naturalists of Alberta with a forum in which questions relating to the conservation of the natural environment may be discussed, so that united positions can be developed on them, and to provide the means of translating these positions into appropriate actions.

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## P R E S I D E N T ' S P A G E

# You CAN change the world...

BY SANDRA FOSS

*We all can. With the weather gods waking up the world and our politicians to the fact that our “environment” has issues with what we do to it, there are many things that each of us can do to lessen our impact on the planet.*

Even a few changes in your home can make a big difference. Replace your light bulbs with the new “curly” light bulbs or compact fluorescent bulbs, which use 65-75% less energy and last up to 10 times longer. Some are instant-on, others have a small delay. Pick the right type for your location. Apparently, IKEA accepts them back for disposal, even when the toxic sites will not (they contain a small amount of mercury).

Unplug appliances that draw power all the time – like the microwave, computer and TV. I have mine on a power bar; all I have to do is remember to turn the power off when I am not watching TV. To save energy, you can purchase sensors (with motion detectors) for night lights, and timers so that lights and devices turn on only when needed.

A programmable thermostat for your furnace is a big help. Program it to suit your life style. Warm up the house for getting up and breakfast, then drop the heat back down if you go out to work all day. It can be set to

heat up just before you arrive home, and drop down again before bedtime. You will save energy and heating costs too. And keep the filters clean.... wash, vacuum or replace, depending on filter type.

When you replace appliances, check energy ratings. Front loading washing machines are much more efficient than top loading, AND they use less water and less soap, and the clothes come out much “drier”. Living in Alberta, with its abundance of wind, I have never needed a clothes dryer. I have a clothesline outside, and a rack in the basement, to use in very cold weather. Some newer communities may prohibit clotheslines, but go to your local Council. This is an easy energy and cost saver, and you don't need to purchase those stinky “perfume” laundry pads to make them smell like the great outdoors!!

Refrigerators with bottom freezers are more energy efficient than those with freezers on top, and much easier to use.

The freezer drawers just slide out on rails, and so it is easy to see what you have in the freezer.

If you have older toilets, consider replacing them with low flush or dual flush fixtures; the new ones use 80% less water - big flushes where needed, or a small flush where there isn't much to go down!! Australians, with less water, are way ahead of us in installing dual flush toilets. Another saving: when you shower or bathe, save the water in the tub, and use a bucket to flush the toilet. That trick comes from a friend with a well, with flows that vary with the seasons. It doesn't seem right to let water that has washed you, or your clothes go down the drain, when there are other safe uses.

My town (Cochrane) has had a program, where recently they delivered to each house low flow faucets for the kitchen and bathroom sinks and bathtubs; your local hardware store likely sells such items. Cochrane also offered subsidies for those who switched the old high water consuming toilets for low flow versions. Your community may

need some encouragement or education, but many Alberta communities are struggling to keep up with demand for water, and some of these ideas may help!!

Slow Food...strange expression, but it is intended to mean the opposite of "fast food" (greasy hamburgers and French fries). It means making sure you buy locally, so the food doesn't have to travel a long way to your house. This is easier in some parts of Canada than the north, but many communities have Farmer's Markets, where the locals bring their produce to sell in season. In Cochrane, that means vegetables from Hutterites and others, lamb and bison from local growers, and furniture and wooden things like birdhouses crafted by local artisans. Beef grown without chemicals is available from local ranchers. Fruit is brought from the Okanagan, and sold from the truck. Eating more fruit and vegetables and less meat helps cut water consumption on the global scale.

I use many different things from my garden.....my children always regarded salads as a bit of an adventure, often featuring dandelions and pig weed or lamb's quarters, for variety and added vitamins. Many years ago, a friend's Mother educated us on the value of using what you have, and I still remember the deep fried burdock roots

(very tasty, nutty flavoured), and thinking, what a great way to deal with weeds!! That friend showed me wild leeks and onions and many other hidden treasures of the woods. I remember trying to "candy" violets to decorate salads, though now I just add nasturtiums (grown in rows in my garden, between the vegetables), for a spicy tang and lots of colour!

With that same friend, I gathered butternuts (white walnuts), and other nuts like hazelnuts that grow wild in some places. It is too cold in Cochrane (less than 60 frost free days /year), but they do grow in southern Alberta as well as Ontario and the Okanagan. I gathered wild grapes and chokecherries (which DO grow here) for jam, jelly and sauces. Highbush cranberries are an exceptionally tasty treat, as are gooseberries, currants and other berries.

With lawn care looming on the horizon soon, trade in your power mower for a people powered mower. For the last several years, Home Depot has had a trade in program, for folks purchasing a push mower, so watch for that.

Scientists have known that increasing greenhouse gases has been an issue for many years, but we can all work to slow the increase. You don't need a Hummer or an SUV to commute to work, or drive to the grocery

store. Try a new smart car, or hybrid car. Sounds like there may even be some government subsidies to support the purchase of a more environmentally friendly vehicle – they already support the gas guzzling muscle car manufacturers with heavy industry subsidies.

When you are out driving, avoid idling the engine. Turn it off at rail crossings while waiting for the train to go by. Don't run into the post office, grocery store or other businesses, and leave a car running in the parking lot. In winter, car experts suggest running your car for no more than one minute before you start driving. Engines warm up faster when in motion. Don't use "Drive Through" restaurants or banks, where you sit in an idling vehicle. It is healthier (and speedier) for all, if you park and walk across the parking lot and into the business.

Think about what you do, and the impact it will have, before you do it. Maintain your equipment...vehicles, vacuums, or whatever. Consider repairs, before replacement. Turn off lights in unoccupied rooms, and use motion sensors on outside lights, and night lights.

Finally, when the next election comes along, vote for a Party that is actually doing something, and not just spouting more hot air!!

## EDITOR'S PAGE

# Changes

BY DENNIS BARESCO

*A new Nature Alberta Editor takes the helm with this issue. Former Editor Brian Parker resigned January 9 (see "letter FROM the Editor", pg 6).*

It was under Brian that Alberta Naturalist underwent a transformation: new format, colour covers – even a new name: Nature Alberta. From FAN and our readers: many thanks, Brian, for your leadership over the past three years.

Your new Editor is Dennis Baresco (that's me). I had a strong interest in the Alberta Naturalist for many years. That interest increased with the update to Nature Alberta, a process in which I was involved. Having coordinated the writing of the job description and the Nature Alberta Editorial Group (NAEG) terms of reference, I am very aware of FAN's expectations.

My interests in Nature Alberta fall in line with those expectations. The magazine's Vision is: "Nature Alberta is the premier voice of naturalists around the province." That is what everyone is striving for. Our purpose: "to produce a quarterly, informative, attractive and well-balanced natural history publication which emphasizes Alberta natural history, naturalist

activities and science, as well as informing readers of emerging issues." I am excited by the thought of having the opportunity to be part of those objectives!

I come with some experience, including: seven years as Editor of the Sagebrush Chronicle (Grasslands Naturalists' newsletter), 12 years managing the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program (lots of writing and editing!) and co-author of Prairie River (on sale in FAN Books on our website). Plus, a lifetime passion for Nature.

Like Brian, I hope to provide you with a worthy variety of articles and content of all kinds. So the call goes out to writers and photographers: if you want variety, then send me variety: na@fanweb.ca. While NA has sometimes been heavy on birds, that is not by design. We only publish submissions we receive – and bird topics seem to be submitted more than all others. For that reason (but mostly because it is a good article), this issue has Lloyd Bennett's story on Whimbrels (pg 19).

"NUGGETS": Variety means length as well as topics. Do you know an interesting, fascinating, unusual or funny "nugget" about Alberta's natural history? Or about an Alberta naturalist? Have you reached some sort of milestone (and yes, getting your 100th bird species will be included)? Can you tell us in under 100 words? Send me your Nuggets, and share them with other naturalists.

FUN: You'll find, and seriously enjoy, "Newton's Occasionally Cryptic Crossword" (page 24), which will be a regular feature. Any Cartoonists out there? Any nature-related humour?

You are probably getting the idea that I would like to see lots of contributors. You're right. Plus, there is always the brief "Letter to the Editor." I think I'll set aside a full page for "Letters" in the Summer issue; I just know they're going to come flooding in!

Enjoy Nature Alberta, the magazine on its way to becoming "the premier voice of naturalists around the province."

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Pelicans disturbed?

I have just received my copy of Volume 36, Number 4 of *Nature Alberta*. While I compliment you on the style of the journal, and encourage your addition of fine photographs, I would like to raise a concern about one of the photos on the inside of the back cover.

Suzanne Earle's photo of American White Pelicans at Portage Lake

clearly shows birds that have been disturbed from nests containing very small chicks. Small pelican chicks are very susceptible to both chilling and overheating when exposed in nests without parental brooding or shading, and may suffer mortality as a result of human disturbance.

I am surprised that *Nature Alberta* would publish a photograph that displayed such insensitivity to the welfare of the birds, and which may have been taken in violation of legislation protecting such colonies from disturbance during the breeding season.

ROSS LEIN, DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

### *Suzanne Earle responds:*

The photos of colonial nesters presented on the inside cover of the last issue of *Nature Alberta* were taken during biological surveys conducted as part of a collaborative research program between the University of Alberta and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD). Research was being conducted by the University to assess double-crested cormorant diet and food web structure. This research was part of a larger-scale effort initiated by ASRD in response to dramatic increases in cormorant numbers in recent years. The

aim of the research program was to provide a greater understanding of cormorant biology in the Lac La Biche area. Collection of field samples, productivity data, and behavioural observations on nesting colonies were always conducted with the utmost concern for all species of birds nesting on these colonies. Particular attention was given to colonies with nesting American White Pelicans given their sensitive nature. Visitation of colonies was delayed in the nesting season until eggs had hatched so the adults would be less likely to abandon their

nests due to human disturbance. In addition, visits to the colony were not conducted in hot or cold weather and chicks were carefully monitored during all sampling events. If signs of heat or cold stress were observed in young birds, the crew would immediately leave the colony and abandon sampling efforts for the day. Although these birds can be extremely sensitive to disturbance, I feel the appropriate precautions were taken to minimize this disturbance while at the same time collecting important biological information about these colonial waterbird species.

# Letter from the Editor

BRIAN PARKER » JANUARY 9, 2007

*After considerable reflection over the Christmas break, I'd like to inform everyone that I have decided to step down as Editor of Nature Alberta, effective with the Winter Issue.*

My decision primarily is a result of personal time constraints combined with a desire to pursue new projects. I already find I am unable to spend as much time as I would like on the Editorship (I haven't been able to aggressively pursue opportunities to expand the subscriber base, for example) and I expect this situation to worsen as the year progresses.

I've enjoyed being Editor of Nature Alberta, and particularly being involved in

its transformation in recent years. I think the change to colour covers in particular has been very successful. We have attracted a new community of contributors...and it's been fun opening up the e-mails.

We [Brian and Laurie] will continue to contribute to the magazine in future issues... I'd like to see Nature Alberta continue to improve and expand its subscriber base.



I think the subscriber base issue is the biggest one facing the magazine. Nature Alberta REALLY needs help in this area...An increase in subscribers should yield more photographic submissions, more opportunity for advertising..., and make it easier to attract articles.

## nugget

**CLIMATE CHANGE & WILDLIFE IMPACTS.** Deborah L. Williams, president of Alaska Conservation Solutions, recently gave a most informative and compelling presentation for Defenders of Wildlife. Her emphasis on wildlife is outstanding. The presentation is available in PowerPoint to anyone who can use it. The information concerns Alaska, but is applicable to global issues of climate change. The presentation can be had at: <http://www.alaskaconservationsolutions.com/acs/presentations.html>

## ALBERTA ISSUES

## SUCCESS: Victoria's Secret: Big Win for Caribou!

In case you missed the December news splash, the Victoria's Secret campaign was a big success, with Limited Brands, the parent company, committing:

- a) to use recycled content in all its catalogues (over 1 million/day);
- b) not to buy wood cut in Woodland Caribou territory; and,
- c) putting one million dollars into caribou research.

A significant point has been made with a recalcitrant forest company and, more importantly, the Alberta government.

A market action has started against Kimberly Clark - makers of toilet paper, Kleenex, and other paper products - to encourage the company to use at least some recycled content in their products. We don't need to wipe 'n blow with pure paper from ancient forests! To find alternate paper sources for these products, Greenpeace has a great (and lengthy) web listing. As to how difficult it is to find these products, it depends where you shop. <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada>

## DANGER: Caribou threatened by Clearcutting!

Alberta's endangered woodland caribou suffered one more nail in the coffin with an about-turn by the Alberta Forest Products Association (AFPA) in its decision to ignore caribou habitat in the so-called "war on pine beetle." Flip-flops by AFPA has led the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) to call for their removal from the Alberta government's Caribou Committee (ACC.).

"There is no proof that these pine beetle control strategies have any chance of success but we do know they will destroy caribou habitat," says ACC member Cliff Wallis. "AFPA... will not operate in good faith [which] has been demonstrated

twice by reversals of decisions they signed on." AFRA, like all members of the ACC's Landscape Team, had originally supported no clearcut logging in caribou range.

Helene Walsh, with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, says: "There are plenty of places for industry to log to try to prevent pine beetle spread, without going near any caribou range" She suggests that industries supporting the caribou recommendations "speak up now...It is also time for government to act...and stop clearcut logging in caribou range." For more information: Cliff Wallis (403) 271-1408.

## RESEARCH: Coal Bed Methane Water Study

The Alberta Geological Survey (AGS) group of the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) has completed a study entitled Water Chemistry of Coalbed Methane Reservoirs that examined the natural chemistry of water from both domestic water wells and coal bed methane wells in central Alberta.

Highlights of the study include: water from coal bed methane wells and domestic water wells have separate and distinct chemical compositions; and, bacteria in water wells could be generating naturally occurring methane in varying amounts.

The study collected and examined water samples from twenty water and coal bed methane wells in a 38,300 square kilometre area of central Alberta that included four major water drainage basins: the Athabasca, North Saskatchewan, Battle and Red Deer Rivers. Water samples were collected from existing domestic water wells and existing coal bed methane wells and age dated according to established scientific criteria. Water samples were tested at the University of Toronto, Purdue University and independent labs within Canada and the United States. **The study can be found at:** <http://www.ags.gov.ab.ca/publications/newreports.shtml>

## ALBERTA ISSUES

**UPCOMING:****Independent experts to review provincial policy on water transfers**

At the request of Alberta's Environment Minister, Rob Renner, the Alberta Water Council, an independent, multi-stakeholder expert group, will begin a review of the province's water management policy governing criteria for transferring water between rivers within the same major basin. Current policy permits this type of transfer

as long as the water is safely available from the source and the new withdrawal does not affect existing licensed water users.

The review stems from a recent water licence application for a mall and racecourse. There is much public concern about water transfers, both inter- and

intra-basin. The Council is expected to provide its recommendations to the Environment Minister this fall. In the meantime, Alberta Environment will continue to accept and process Water Act applications. Transfers between rivers in the same basin are not considered inter-basin transfers, which require special approval. For more information on the Alberta Water Council, visit [www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca](http://www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca).

**PROGRESS?****Mineable Oil Sands Strategy (MOSS)**

Following consultations with the public, a multi-stakeholder committee (MSC) has developed an interim report, which identifies a vision and principles for the future of oilsands development in Alberta. The MSC recommendations weigh heavily on idealistic motherhood

statements, and how/if they will translate into reality is the billion dollar question. A copy of the MSC Interim Report for Phase I, as well as further information related to this consultation initiative, is available at [www.oilsandsconsultations.gov.ab.ca](http://www.oilsandsconsultations.gov.ab.ca)

**NEW: Cougars killed**

The establishment of a small population of cougar in the Cypress Hills was set back when an adult female and her two young (subadults) were killed just outside the Park on Dec 27/06. Reportedly, the family was accidentally killed with snares set for coyote at a baited site by a holder of a resident trapping licence. In Alberta, including Cypress Hills, cougars are protected year-round; in Saskatchewan: only within the Park.

Baited snares for coyotes have been responsible for the deaths of several species, including swift fox, golden eagle, and Swainson's hawk. Coyote may be legally trapped Oct 1 - Feb 28 by holders of resident licences and may be shot throughout the year without any licence by anyone with landowner's or leaseholder's permission to access the private or public lands. Baited traps attract other wildlife; thus, legal protection doesn't mean much when trapping continues to be permitted in the absence of an AB Sustainable Resource Development policy to reduce this needless mortality risk.

**TEMPERATURE WAS -30°C, BUT IT ACTUALLY WARMED UP 5 DEGREES UNDER THAT CLOUD OF NASTINESS**



## **FAILING:** Watchdog still has no answers on environmental impact of oilsands

An agency set up in the 1990s by the provincial and federal governments, in response to a Supreme Court of Canada ruling, to figure out how many oilsands projects could go ahead before causing permanent environmental damage still has no answers, though new projects continue to be approved and the environment grossly damaged.

The agency, the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), is hampered because it is science based; the issues are complex so take time to develop well-founded recommendations. Meanwhile, oilsands projects are continuously approved, something CEMA

has no control over, though it becomes the scapegoat. It seems there is more interest in posturing and shifting blame to CEMA for lack of recommendations than there is in creating conditions which would allow CEMA to achieve the credible science required for its recommendations.

Toxic Watch's Myles Kitagawa, a CEMA member, wants a freeze on new oilsands projects until the environmental questions are answered. Perhaps the important question is: why do environmental groups stay involved and allow themselves to be used in processes so obviously tainted and foredoomed?

## **COMING SOON:** Ethanol: an Exciting Opportunity for Legislated Subsidies

Legislation requiring ethanol-gasoline mixtures is at hand, and the agriculture and energy industry is all a'twitter over the expected largesse. The ethanol-fuel industry exists solely because of cash handouts from taxpayers and has limited – maybe no – environmental benefits. It's uneconomical, reduces a car's fuel economy by a third (its lower heat value means it costs drivers more to go the same distance), takes massive amounts of energy to produce (essentially, it's a fossil fuel product), delivers

a net energy gain of only about four percent – and some studies indicate that it takes more energy to produce than it delivers - and will almost certainly result in increased pollution and habitat destruction.

The good part? Using new "super-enzymes," ethanol will one day be produced at a reasonable cost from biomass waste (waste wood, sewage, grasses) rather than subsidy-fertilized corn. Until then, as Eric Reguly says, "ethanol is about protecting the corn trade

## **RE-RUN:** Use of strychnine to kill "gophers" rears its head again

An Alberta rancher and MP wants the government to go back to using two per cent liquid strychnine as a tool for farmers to control Richardson's Ground Squirrel populations. Ottawa allows a weaker pre-mix solution but has resisted (at least, so far) bringing back the 2% blend. Health Canada's reasons are solid: while all strychnine is dangerous and kills indiscriminately, the 2% solution increases the number of non-targetted animals suffering a very unpleasant death. This is aggravated under present methods of distribution and delivery of the poison, since it is impossible to control how responsibly it's applied in the field.

What can you do? Let Health Canada, your MP, MLA, local Council and newspaper know how you feel about the use of strychnine. If you want more information on the problems, contact the FAN office and we'll send you a summary.

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and funneling taxpayer loot to [industry]" (Globe and Mail Report on Business, Jan 25 2007).

What can you do? TV/print advertisements are spinning fact-challenged propaganda; complain to networks, magazines, the Advertising Standards of Canada. Tell everyone you know about this charade.

# FAN 2006 Awards

*Each year, FAN recognizes several individuals who have outstandingly contributed to FAN and/or Alberta's natural environment. The awards for 2006 were presented at the March 31st joint Edmonton Nature Club & FAN AGM banquet. Our congratulations to all the honoured recipients.*

## **VOLUNTEERS AWARDS**

Four outstanding Volunteers with the Alberta Bird Atlas Project were presented with Awards.

**Lois Burkinshaw** (Innisfail, AB) went above and beyond as a Regional Coordinator, providing motivational letters of inspiration, thank you letters, and personal information newsletters for her regional volunteers. Lois worked closely with her volunteers organizing group birding trips, holding birding seminars and working to establish access to restricted survey areas.

**Joan Kerr** (Beaverlodge, AB) has easily surveyed the most Atlas squares in the Northwest region of Alberta as well as simultaneously taking on bird surveys in British Columbia. Her birding stories, from sun up to sun down, are inspiring and demonstrate her deep passion for birds.

**Ted Hindmarch** (Cold Lake, AB) has tackled more atlas squares in the region than any other volunteer – plus done BBS and Owl surveys. He has been a driving force for the Atlas, encouraging others to take part in the project and other conservation efforts. Ted was a key coordinator in gaining access to the Cold Lake Air Weapons range, a rare opportunity to conduct bird surveys in a restricted area.

**Andy Murphy** (Lacombe, AB) not only tackled the most atlas squares in his region but often new squares that were lacking survey coverage.

## **DON STILES: HONOURARY LIFE MEMBER AWARD**

*Don Stiles has been a steady and enduring force in the Natural history community since 1976, and has influenced conservation in many areas in the province.*



**BANDING BLUEBIRDS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS FOR DON!** ANDREW STILES  
SITE: ELLIS BIRD FARM

His volunteer work for FAN has been astounding: on the FAN Board, as Calgary Field Naturalists Society (CFNS) representative from 1980 until late 1990's, and since then an appointed Director; FAN rep on the Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum; FAN Vice-President, President, Past President (for an extended period) and Recording Secretary; long active in research as a FAN volunteer, soliciting and coordinating other volunteers for a wide variety of flora and fauna counts; and long-time Calgary Regional Coordinator for the Bird Atlas. His contributions are many and invaluable and, in recognition, he received the prestigious Loran Goulden Award (1995). Don still attends a wide variety of meetings for FAN.

## FAN 2006 Awards...continued

Outside of FAN, Don was on the CFNS University Prairie Research team (until the land was dug up for the Alberta Children's Hospital). Don, for many years, attended Calgary Council Meetings and reviewed and commented on developments in many areas of the city from a natural history perspective, giving input to Council on behalf of CFNS. He has been involved for many years with CFNS, receiving the "Life Member" award in 1998.

The organizer and leader of many field trips, Don has shared his love and knowledge of the world around him with many others. In 1979, he started the Calgary Bluebird Trail network and this has grown to the point where many thousands of bluebirds and tree swallows owe their existence to the efforts of this group. Don has himself maintained a Bluebird Trail for over 25 years. Thanks for your tireless efforts Don. You have made a difference!

Don Stiles joins four other Honourary Life Members:  
*Edgar T Jones, Dorothy Dickson, Pat Clayton and Ian Halladay.*

### **GLEN SEMENCHUK: LORAN GOULDEN AWARD**

*Glen's involvement with FAN spans eighteen years: from the start of The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta project in 1988; to his hiring as Executive Director; to his hard work on the new, internationally acclaimed, Royal Museum of Alberta wildlife gallery, "Wild Alberta"; to the about-to-be published Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta: A Second Look.*

During that time, Glen has raised millions of dollars, started dozens of conservation projects, been a formidable presence in countless wildlife management issues, built FAN into a greatly respected and widely recognized naturalist organization, taught courses, and represented FAN and its clubs innumerable times - from local to international. Glen's name and voice are synonymous with FAN, but also with conservation efforts throughout this province. His astuteness and grasp of issues is inspiring.

Everyone in FAN is proud to have Glen as our Executive Director, and congratulates him on the well-deserved honour of receiving the Loran Goulden Award. (For more details on Glen's contribution to FAN, see Nature Alberta, Vol 36, #1, Spring 2006, pg 13.)

**THE SERENITY OF A STILL LAKE AT SUNSET KEEPS THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE AND IS A REMINDER OF WHY GLEN DEDICATES HIMSELF TO CONSERVATION.**



# It's Spring!

BY DENNIS BARESCO

The 2007 Vernal Equinox – Spring - officially starts March 20, at 7:07 pm and lasts until the Summer Solstice, June 21, 1:06 pm.

## A Spring Growl

If there comes a little thaw,  
Still the air is chill and raw,  
Here and there a patch of snow,  
Dirtier than the ground below,  
Dribbles down a marshy flood;  
Ankle-deep you stick in mud  
In the meadows while you sing,  
“This is Spring.”

— CHRISTOPHER PEARCE CRANCH

“*Spring is when you feel  
like whistling, even with  
a shoe full of slush.*”

DOUG LARSON

## The Swarm!

BY DENNIS BARESCO

It could be from a science fiction movie: millions of nymphs living, sometimes for years, hidden beneath the water, then suddenly, of a May evening, all emerging together, ghost-like, transformed into pale, lace-winged creatures with willowy tails and incapable of taking in any nourishment. Rising in thick clouds, swarming – especially around lights! -and “dancing” wildly, the bulbous-eyed males seize and mate aerially with the females which almost immediately eject billions of eggs. By dawn or at most in a few days, all are destined for death, the ground eerily shrouded with their weightless corpses.

That’s the dramatic view, though the Mayfly reality is more complicated. For one thing, they are somewhat misnamed, as they can emerge throughout the summer. They are also quite unique in the fascinating world of metamorphosis. That is, the stage that first emerges – the nymph, or naiad – molts into a winged subimago (or dun, as fishermen call them) but very quickly, it sheds and becomes the adult, or spinner.

For trout and other fish, it’s an unmatched feast. For naturalists, the Mayfly hatch is an awesome spectacle – even when it isn’t in May.



**TWO PRONGHORN KIDS ON THE PLAINS OF CFB SUFFIELD CAN'T ESCAPE THEIR CURIOUS NATURE, BUT NUMBER THREE STICKS TIGHT TO MOTHER!**

PHOTO COURTESY MEDICINE HAT INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM/CFB SUFFIELD



# nuggets

Send *your* Nuggets to [na@fanweb.ca](mailto:na@fanweb.ca).

## M.J. LOVES ART

BY VALERIE MARTINS

M.J., the resident burrowing owl at Police Point Park Nature Centre (Medicine Hat), showed strong interest in a recent art exhibit. He would run along the ledge (part of the gallery wall), stopping to closely examine each individual art piece. He even chose a favourite painting and always came back to sit by it.

While MJ was away for a week, the exhibit was removed. Upon his return, MJ flew from his cage to the ledge and raced along, looking for the missing art. He spent the rest of the day "hooting" in anger at the staff!

## GOOSE VS HERON

BY DENNIS BARESCO

The Hans Mueller photos of a Canada Goose nesting in a cottonwood (NA Fall 2006) elicited several questions. One concerned the use of pre-built tree nests by that species. Around Police Point Park in Medicine Hat, Canada Geese use nests in the Great Blue Heron colony. Great choice in theory; bad choice in reality! The herons may return in Spring before the goslings have hatched. Ben Velner has seen herons coming in from their migratory flight, heading methodically for their nest, each with that great sharp beak targetting the usurping Canada Goose. The goose flees immediately!

## GRIZZLY VS COUGAR

BY DENNIS BARESCO

A short internet video clip captured a confrontation (location unknown) between an approaching grizzly and a female cougar (presumably protecting her kitten). Standing its ground, the cougar lashed out at the much larger bear, which swayed its head back and forth. Then she charged, twisted to the side, grabbed the grizzly's face and neck, chomped on its ear and whirled back into the face-to-face stance. The bear slowly backed up a bit. In a vain effort to save face, it let out a roar, then turned, and ran, with the cougar in pursuit and slashing at the bear's hind end. Very exciting!

## QUIK 'N EASY

BY DENNIS BARESCO

People want to know potential solutions to ecological and environmental problems. Last issue, I'd written an article, "Advertising Power," outlining how one relatively effortless task could lead to a positive environmental result. There are many "things" that are so easy-to-do, they might better be called "task-bits." They may not save the natural world, but they help! Sandra Foss tells of some in her "President's Page" (pg 2). Here are two others.

### Put a Cork in it!

Talk about a global economy: naturalists in Red Deer, Grand Prairie, Pincher Creek, Calgary, or anywhere can help 260 species of birds, (including Spanish imperial eagles), Barbary deer, Iberian Lynx, Portuguese farmers, cork-oak trees and a centuries-old local economy.

How? Buy wine stopped with cork; don't buy wine with plastic (aka oil) stoppers. Plastic – oil – is fast replacing cork, which means the ancient and bio-diverse Portuguese cork-oak savannas, called montados, will disappear. One of the reasons for the switch to plastic is because real cork increases the price of a bottle of wine by as much as twenty-four cents, though no word on the extra cost to the environment. Tell your friends. Tell everyone you know. Environmental protection doesn't get any easier.

Information for the above came from Audubon (Jan-Feb 2007), read the full story there, or on the website: [www.audubonmagazine.org](http://www.audubonmagazine.org).

### Do the Math

Want to know how many animals house cats in your town or city kill

every year? For every 50 humans, there are 8-10 housecats. On average, each cat kills 30-60 animals/year: 65 - 70% mammals; 25% birds; 5 - 10% other (frogs, snakes, butterflies, etc). Do the math and you'll understand why "catastrophic" is one of the milder terms used to describe this completely avoidable slaughter. The solutions are easy, the best being: keep cats indoors or in an outdoor enclosure – which has the added benefit of eliminating debilitating diseases and parasitic worms spread by outdoor cats - especially to children.

Yes, there are many other factors that harm songbirds and other animals, but outdoor cats are one of the easiest factors to eliminate. Take note that bells and the well-fed make no difference in reducing a cat's "harvest." (All figures in this article are based on scientific studies.)

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# The Beautiful Uplands

BY DAWN DICKINSON

*If you come with mountain landscapes in your head expecting a minor, but instant drama of broken skyline, you will be unimpressed.*

From a distance the Cypress Hills – these “beautiful uplands” – run to horizontal lines; the brush strokes of a long, high plateau that rises some 600 metres above the surface of the surrounding prairies. Once, this plateau formed the bed of a wide, braided river, which carried waters to the east from the front ranges of the Rocky Mountains. Where the current slowed, sand, gravels and cobbles of quartzite, argillite and chert were deposited. Subsequent geological uplifting of the region changed the drainage of streams to the northeast, and the high plains through which the river had flowed were gradually eroded. The dry, boulder-protected riverbed became instead a watershed – which seems a rather strange fate for the bed of a great river. Now water moves beneath layers of sands and gravels, undermines escarpments, and wells up in abundant clear springs – the headwaters of many streams.

It is not perhaps given to many riverbeds to stand at the height of land, recipient of summer

rains and winter snows, directing towards which of two seas these waters will flow – Hudson’s Bay or the Gulf of Mexico. But this height of land between the Saskatchewan and Missouri river basins is also the highest point of land in Canada between the Torngat Mountains of Labrador and the Rocky Mountains of the West – a distinction that is not apparent from the recumbent length of its cloud-shadowed mass.

*I e-kim-me-coo or ib-kib-kimi-ko*, the Blackfoot name, means “narrow ridge”, a ridge that was once a river and which curves for some 145 kms across the plains, about 16 kms across at its widest point. When you are far out on the plains in the heat of July, where the sun-bleached grasses whisper dryly in a hot, dry wind, and the grasshoppers move at your feet with a dry, crackling sound, and around the warm, shallow, alkaline water of the sloughs the mud is cracked and lifeless; the distant, dark line of the hills seems like a mirage, with its promise of shade, and of cold

water running by grasses still green and starred with wildflowers. Among the landscapes of the mind, hills and plains are, like complementary colours, necessary to each other for deepest expression of each. Because of the nature of these fiercely uncompromising plains, the Hills have a quality of refuge – like an island in a great sea. For most of the last 12,000 years until the end of the 19th century the sea was of grass. But before that, for some 42,000 years or more, great masses of Laurentide ice ebbed and flowed around the Hills and rose once to cover all but the highest western part, an area of about 3000 km<sup>2</sup> most of which lies in what is now Alberta.

The Inuit call heights of land that rise above glaciers nunataks, and geologists have adopted that word in their description of landforms. It means “lonely peaks”. In the depths of winter you can stand on the south side of the Hills in the early morning and see, 140 km to the southwest, the lonely peaks of the Sweetgrass Hills, dark between the growing light of the sky and the dim, reflected skylight of the snow-covered plains. In the bitter, early morning cold, you can get a sense of how it might have seemed



**REESOR LAKE, NAMED AFTER A LOCAL RANCHING FAMILY, WAS ONCE 2 LAKES SIDE-BY-SIDE, CALLED "TWIN LAKES"**

DAWN DICKINSON

thousands of years ago when the Cypress Hills and the Sweetgrass Hills were lonely, snow-covered islands of barely possible life and death in a great sea of glacial ice. Long before the human mind had need of a refuge from the industrial world, some small part of the Hills stood alone, above another powerful, abiotic force. Perhaps it is this presence from their ice-age past that still lingers in the Hills today.

When the glaciers retreated northeast, leaving stagnant ice and the debris of till over a scarified earth, their meltwaters carved out deep channels dividing the plateau into a series of uplands; an archipelago that curves nearly 160 kms across the plains. Crowding the receding ice sheets, arctic tundra moved north over permafrost. Bog cotton, sedges, low shrubs of willow and alder, and carpets of pale yellow mountain avens on gravelly outwash plains, were joined in time by scattered stands

of white spruce. To move into these post-glacial lands, the trees needed thawed soil, colonization by nitrogen-fixing tundra plants, and the presence of mycorrhizal fungi. Strong winds brought the seeds of those and other plants as well as the spores of fungi. In time, forests from the mountains to the southwest probed into the plains and their pine and spruce trees grew tall in the rains and deep snows. But then the climate grew much warmer and drier and in the rainshadow of the Rockies the forests were succeeded by grasslands. Amid the returning grasses, stands of poplar and remnant outposts of coniferous forest were left, mostly on the higher and north-facing slopes of the Cypress Hills, where more rain fell than on the plains, and where the shade in summer stayed longest and the snows in winter melted last. Here, western white spruce and lodgepole pine grow together - and on no other outlying upland in the Canadian prairies.

It was the forests of lodgepole pine that gave the Hills their European name. The French word "cyprès" was the name that came to be used by Canadiens initially for jackpine, and later also lodgepole pine, although in France it means the dissimilar and unrelated cypress trees. Pines were important to voyageurs because of their resinous sap, which was used to waterproof seams of wooden boats and birchbark canoes. Jackpine and paper birch grow along most of the length of the North Saskatchewan River so materials for running repairs along this major canoe route were plentiful. However, the South Saskatchewan is a prairie river and a different matter. To the few traders who occasionally travelled as far as its confluence with the Red Deer River, the lodgepole pine in the hills ninety miles or so to the south were the closest source of resin. To Peter Fidler of Hudson's Bay Company, who built the first Chesterfield House on the South

## The Beautiful Uplands...continued

Saskatchewan River at the mouth of the Red Deer in 1800, these were the *I-ab-kim-me-coo* of the Blackfoot where he sent his men for resin. To the Plains Cree they were the beautiful uplands - *Mun-a-tub-gow*. But to the Canadiens they were Les Montagnes de Cyprès and it is as the Cypress Hills that John Palliser and James Hector mapped and wrote of them in 1859. They have been the Cypress Hills on maps ever since,

but those who live near them mostly just call them the Hills.

Leaving the prairies you can climb 300 metres up through the steep, north escarpment forests and top out on another prairie - a wide plateau of fescue grassland bounded by stands of pine, aspen and spruce, and deeply dissected by forested valleys. It is a montane landscape separated from the foothills and mountains to the west by some 250 km of

prairie. Here on these uplands, between six and seven thousand years ago, remnants of pine, spruce, and aspen forests found refuge from the severe droughts of the hypsithermal, and provided shaded refugia for montane and boreal woodland flowers. Below about the 1,220 metre contour line, the fescue grasslands gradually merge with the wheat grasses, spear grasses and blue grama that

dominate the surrounding mixed-grass prairies. Grasslands and forests, marsh-bordered lakes, perched wetlands and spring-fed creeks, knife-edged ridges and conglomerate cliffs, combine to form a richly diverse landscape.

How many times have forests and grasslands advanced and receded within the Cypress Hills over the past 10,000 years? What shapes have the boundaries between forest and grasslands taken? And how have changes in climate redrawn those boundaries over plateau, slopes, valleys and escarpments? Constraints of topography, soil depth and water table may here and there dictate a boundary drawn with precision, but mostly the line is smudged; a wide ecotone of young spruce scattered among grass; of old fire-scarred trees around small clearings in the forest; of open-grown, wide-branched lodgepole pine shading the edges of grassy coulee heads.

Air photos taken every few years since 1945 record encroachment of forest into grasslands both on the plateau and at lower elevations in valleys, although they also record upland areas where the forest/grassland boundary has remained unchanged during that period. But 50 years is not even a human lifetime and scarcely any time at all, as the Hills measure time. What happened before that period is not just of academic interest, but has relevance to current Park management policies and various interpretations of what



**LOW CONGLOMERATE CLIFFS, INCLUDING THESE AT THE HEADWATERS OF BATTLE CREEK, ARE A FASCINATING GEOLOGICAL FEATURE OF CYPRESS HILLS** DENNIS BARESCO

## The Beautiful Uplands...continued

is within the normal range of variation. While bits of evidence, like the clues in a who-dunnit, can still be detected, they are incomplete. A few old snapshots, and scant notes in reports by government surveyors provide fragments, but these go back only to the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

A much longer record comes from the evidence of soil profiles, fossil pollen and fossil charcoal, and fire-scarred trees that can be aged by their growth rings. Some soil profiles have shown development of forest soils over soils that were previously formed under grass. Others have shown that part of the plateau now under grass was formerly forested and that at one time the forest extended on some slopes up to seven kilometers south of the plateau. Radiocarbon

dating of organic material in these soils indicates that the tree-line has advanced beyond its present position several times since the Wisconsin glaciation with a major advance 4500 to 3600 years ago. Pollen records from a lake on the north edge of the Hills also indicate an increase in pine and spruce forests during that same time period, which was succeeded by a warmer, drier climate in which grasslands probably flourished. Then, between about 700 and 130 years ago, came the deeper snows and colder temperatures of the Little Ice Age which lasted until the late nineteenth century. Glaciers in the Rocky Mountains advanced during this period, and in northern Canada the treeline retreated south of its present position as the tundra expanded.

But periods of severe drought also occurred during the Little Ice Age in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, as indicated by tree rings of old limber pine in the foothills of southwestern Alberta. The twentieth century has seen a warming trend of global extent, when glaciers as far apart as those in the Rocky Mountains and in New Zealand retreated once again.

Predictions are numerous, but none of us know what really lies ahead. One thing is certain. The inconstant climate, the restless movement of air masses, winters of snow and ice, summers of drought and fire, sudden storms, floods and landslides, all militate against any mere human desire to maintain the status quo.

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"Beautiful Uplands" is from *Landscape with Elk*, by Dawn Dickinson.



Saskatchewan naturalist Robert David (R.D.) Symons (1898-1973) was well known as a writer, illustrator, painter, Cypress Hills game warden and rancher. Moving to Canada from England as a sixteen year old, he worked as a cowboy and eventually joined the forest service as a forest ranger during the late 1930's or early 40's. He was posted to Cypress Hills West Block and the Battle Creek ranger station during which time he build his cabin. He created many of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History's dioramas, and many of his books are considered classics.

**R.D. SYMONS' CABIN ALONG BATTLE CREEK**

DAWN DICKINSON



# Prairie Mirage

BY ROB GARDNER

*On November 20 2005, our family was driving west on the Trans-Canada Highway from Medicine Hat to Calgary.*

Near Cluny, we were surprised to view the Rockies, a more easterly location than ever before. Shortly after, we noticed that the lower slopes of the mountains had a wall-like appearance. The mountains appeared stretched vertically, with all irregularities being elongated into dramatic vertical stripes. Within fifteen minutes, the distortion faded away, leaving normal-looking mountains.

We had been lucky enough to view a mirage. These do not seem to be particularly rare, since I have observed about a dozen over the last ten years. They are rarely reported, though, increasing the value of the following note presented in the *Alberta Historical Review* (Summer 1959, v. 7, no. 3, p.23), and originally reported in the *Calgary Tribune* (Feb 15, 1888):

*A beautiful mirage of the "Devil's Head" and surrounding mountains was clearly perceptible from Calgary on Tuesday. The "Devil's Head" appeared about ten times its usual height, while*

*the mountain to the north stood out very plainly and resembled an immense castle. A light cloud that hung over it looked like smoke ascending from the chimney. The mountains to the south stood out in bold relief, and the whole view presented one of the grandest and most picturesque sights ever witnessed in Calgary. The whole ranges seemed to be just above Shaganappi Point and was viewed by a great number of citizens.*

In my experience, mirages are generally observed in the winter when a Chinook is just starting. The presence of layers of air, each of different temperature, can lead to a range of optical effects. Most commonly, warm air overlying the cold surface air refracts the image, creating a vertical exaggeration as illustrated by the description of the columnar cloud quoted above. This sometimes can make the mountains appear much closer. In other cases, when the warm air is well stratified, it can act as a mirror, reflecting and inverting the image of the mountains, thereby creating an hourglass shape.

An everyday version of mirage is the pool of "water" seen on distant hot pavement. This is actually the image of the sky being reflected by the layer of hot air adjacent to the pavement. Deserts may also give a similar effect, with an image of a lake appearing on the sand. The general term of "mirage" includes a range of peculiar atmospheric effects, generally some combination of vertical exaggeration and reflection, but other versions are also possible. For example, I have seen a dark shadow, almost a haze, across the prairie that I suspect may be the shadow of a sharply-defined layer of warmer air.

I encourage readers to watch the sky for interesting phenomena, an intriguing aspect of our natural world. Pay close attention on days when the mountains appear much closer than usual; the more dramatic reflective mirage could suddenly appear. Any other reports of mirages in Alberta would be welcome.

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REFERENCE: [www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/elements/](http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/elements/)

# Whimbrels

BY LLOYD BENNETT

## in the Taber Area

*In most of Alberta, the Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus) is a very rarely seen spring migrant. Salt and Salt (1976) stated that "very few Whimbrels migrate through the interior, and records in the Prairie Provinces are usually sightings of singles or small groups."*

Peterson (1961) reported that Whimbrels are "sparse on the Canadian plains." Whimbrels are known to breed in two disjunct areas of North America: along the western coast of Hudson Bay; and the northwestern Mackenzie, northwestern Yukon, and northeastern Alaska (Godfrey 1986). The main migration routes are said to be along the coasts, with only small numbers traveling inland (Godfrey 1986). They are highly anticipated by many Alberta birders, but rarely seen except by a lucky few each year. However, in the Taber AB area, about 50 km. east of Lethbridge, they can be quite common birds for a short period every spring.

In my 27 years of observations starting in 1980, Whimbrels have never failed to appear by early May near Taber, and flocks can always be found. In fact, their arrival is quite predictable. All

first sightings these years have been in the period between April 27 and May 5, with the majority of first sightings coming between May 1 and 4. These first arrivals are usually single birds or small groups. During the second and third weeks of May, sightings become more frequent, sometimes almost daily, and the numbers increase as well. A few

stragglers are sometimes found the last week of May, and very rarely in early June.

The year that I discovered Whimbrels in the Taber area was 1980, the same year that I discovered most birds in general. Just a few months earlier I had become serious about birds, struggling to learn about them with only the help



**WHIMBREL**  
LLOYD BENNETT

## Whimbrels in the Taber Area...continued

of field guides. I lived on a farm, and carried binoculars with me whenever possible while working, in order not to miss anything. May 3, 1980 was the first day that I positively identified Whimbrels. I was working on a tractor in the field when a flock of 13 large shorebirds landed not far away in the freshly worked soil, and later walked into a field of short alfalfa. My first thought was that they were Long-billed Curlews (*Numenius americanus*), because their curved bills were quite apparent. However, upon closer examination with binoculars, I saw that their bills were only about 10 cm. long, and the birds were smaller and grayer than Long-billed Curlews. I was familiar with curlews, since I saw them frequently in the prairie near Taber, so I guessed that these unfamiliar birds were related to them. At home, a search in my field guide revealed that they were Whimbrels. I then realized that I had seen 5 Whimbrels flying over a field 2 days earlier. During the next few days, I had many more sightings of Whimbrels, and learned a great deal about their description, calls, and behavior.

Table 1 shows all records from 1980, and how Whimbrels became common birds in the

Taber area during the first 3 weeks of May, and occasional after that. In all other years since 1980, Whimbrel records have had a similar pattern of occurrence.

Whimbrels are large shorebirds, about the size of the Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*). The most obvious field mark is the bill, curved down as in the Long-billed Curlew, but much shorter, about 10 cm. long.

Much of the body is a mottled brownish-gray, with the neck and breast lighter than the back and wings, and the belly is whitish. Another mark to look for is the two dark stripes on the crown, which are divided by a thin light median line, with another light stripe just over the eye. Another dark stripe passes through the eye from the bill. The legs are bluish-gray, and the bill is black.

**TABLE 1** All sightings of Whimbrels in 1980 by the author, all from the Taber area.

DATE	DAILY #S	COMMENTS, OR HABITAT
May 1	5	flying over field
May 3	13	in plowed field or in alfalfa
May 5	20	in same field
May 6	11+9+8	in same field
May 7	6+11	in same field
May 8	5+13+30	5+13 in field, 30 flying over
May 9	11	flying over field
May 10	1	flying over field
May 11	1+11	in fields
May 12	2+1	in alfalfa
May 13	1	in alfalfa
May 14	1+1	1 in field, 1 flying over
May 15	2	in fields
May 23	4+1	4 flying over, 1 in field
May 28	1+1+1	single birds flying over
June 6	1	flying over

## Whimbrels in the Taber Area...continued

Whimbrels are quite loud and vocal during spring migration, with three distinguishable calls, all of which are somewhat similar to calls of the Long-billed Curlew. One is a short witiiti, all syllables with an upward inflection. A longer call is a trumpeting tititititi, which drops slightly in pitch, and the third begins with a low bubbling call for about a second, then builds up into a repetition of tititititi again.

Table 2 shows the fairly regular arrival dates, also the less regular latest spring dates. The latest spring date is June 6, and I have no fall records. The numbers vary considerably from year to year, but Table 2 shows that the lowest maximum number has been between 30 and 35 on 5 occasions, and only 15 in 1998, but most years there are many more. The number of days of sightings per year varies from 3 to 20, but I suspect that the low numbers reflect my lack of daily record-keeping of common birds in those years, and not lack of Whimbrels. Be that as it may, it is apparent that there is a major movement of Whimbrels annually into the Taber area.

I was not aware that Whimbrels were considered to be rare in Alberta until 1990, when I joined the Lethbridge Naturalists Society, and began to report my

**TABLE 2** Earliest and latest spring dates from 1980 to 2006, as well as the largest daily total per year and number of days of sightings per year, by the author. Most sightings were from the Taber area, with a few sightings from Stirling and Tyrrell Lakes, Grassy Lake, and a few from the Vauxhall and Brooks areas.

YEAR	FIRST SPRING	LAST SPRING	LARGEST NUMBER	DAYS OF SIGHTINGS
1980	May 1	June 6	48	16
1981	April 27	May 18	35	6
1982	May 4	May 19	50	12
1983	May 4	June 1	100	14
1984	May 3	May 29	40	7
1985	May 1	May 23	150	5
1986	May 1	May 15	30	4
1987	May 1	May 25	33	6
1988	April 30	May 21	30	4
1989	May 4	May 23	110	5
1990	May 3	May 27	40	5
1991	May 5	May 15	60	3
1992	April 30	May 16	85	13
1993	April 27	May 25	65	16
1994	April 27	May 16	160	6
1995	May 2	May 24	215	10
1996	April 29	May 22	160	12
1997	May 3	May 24	40	11
1998	May 4	May 23	15	11
1999	May 2	May 22	100	14
2000	April 30	May 20	35	14
2001	April 29	May 23	126	11
2002	May 3	May 26	300	18
2003	May 1	May 20	300	13
2004	May 1	May 27	860	18
2005	April 27	May 25	140	18
2006	May 3	May 24	660	20

## Whimbrels in the Taber Area...continued

bird sightings to a provincial compiler. Prior to this time I was alone in my birding activities, and unknown to other birders. Other people became quite interested when they learned of my regular Whimbrel sightings.

Now, the question is: if so many Whimbrels move through the Taber area each spring, where do they go from there, and why are more not recorded in other areas of Alberta? For example, in the Calgary area they are not seen every year, and 1 or 2 birds is considered to be a typical number, although small flocks have occurred (Ross Dickson, Peter Sherrington, and Gus Yaki, pers. comm.). There are very few records from the Medicine Hat area (Dennis Baresco, pers. comm.). In the Lethbridge area, individuals or small groups of up to 5 or 10 birds are found most years (Liz Saunders, pers. comm.). Occasionally, large flocks have occurred. 71 were found near Monarch on May 12, 1995 (Liz Saunders, pers. comm.), and an impressive 150 were found at Keho Lake on May 13, 1990 (Teresa and Doug Dolman, pers. comm.). In central Alberta, Whimbrel sightings are very scarce and irregular (Richard Klauke, Judy Boyd, Margot Hervieux, pers. comm.).

Sadler and Myres (1976) reported Whimbrel sightings in Alberta in only 3 years from 1961 to 1970, all from Beaverhill Lake, with the largest number 24 birds. Pinel, Smith, and Wershler (1991) reported many more records from 1971 to 1980 than in the previous decade from a variety of locations, although numbers were generally small. Whimbrels were found in spring between May 5 and June 4, and Alberta's first fall record was reported from the Fort McMurray area, with a single bird on August 24, 1980 (Pinel et al 1991). This decade saw the record for the highest number in Alberta, set near Raymond, southeast of Lethbridge. On May 13, 1979, a flock of 264 birds was found in a field of flooded stubble and alfalfa, and 25 were found earlier the same day by the same observer at Stirling Lake, which is a few kilometers to the east (Alan R. Smith, pers. comm.).

Starting in 2002, the number of Whimbrels has increased dramatically in southern Alberta. In both 2002 and 2003, flocks of 300 birds were seen by the author northeast of Taber, which surpassed the 1979 record number. In 2004, almost unbelievable numbers were found by the author. The

first good number was a flock of 70, found at Stirling Lake on May 6. 4 days later, on May 10, 560 Whimbrels were counted in several corn stubble fields north of Fincastle Lake, which is east of Taber. 615 birds were found on May 14, and to top it off, an amazing 860 were found on May 16. These birds were in the same fields, or resting on the shores of Fincastle Lake.

Since the inception of the Brooks Spring Bird Count in 1999, varying numbers of Whimbrels have been found each year. In four of the eight years, very small numbers (four to nine) were counted; however, 36 were found in 2006, 86 in 2005, 167 in 2002, and the highest number of 741 came in 2003 (Bob Parsons, pers. comm.). Another very significant number in this area was when 550 were found on May 11, 2005, in irrigated fields in the Rolling Hills area south of Brooks (Gus Yaki, pers. comm.). And on May 15, 2006, 800 birds were found in 2 flocks, of 500 and 300, once again in the Rolling Hills area (Bob Parsons, pers. comm.).

A search of available literature reveals that Whimbrels are not found at any one location in Alberta on a regular basis, with the possible exception of the Brooks area, which may

## Whimbrels in the Taber Area...continued

have varying numbers every year. Therefore, the regular Taber sightings are quite significant, but a mystery as to why Whimbrels occur in such numbers. One possible explanation is that the Taber region is a staging area for Whimbrels. Some other shorebirds are known to congregate in large numbers in certain locations, while very few are seen in other areas. One example in Alberta is the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which stages on the western side of Beaverhill Lake annually, while records from other areas of the province are extremely rare (Ross Dickson, pers. comm.). Whimbrels are strong flyers, and could conceivably fly long distances without stopping after leaving Taber, which might explain the lack of records in other areas.

Another possibility is that Whimbrels are traveling mainly in areas not frequented by birders, such as in farmland, and not at lakes. The great majority of records from the Taber area are from farmland, usually freshly worked soil or short alfalfa, and sometimes at puddles in fields or in wet pastures. Here they appear to be feeding on worms and some insects, such as grasshoppers and beetles. Less frequently they are found at lakeshores or

sloughs, although some of the largest numbers have come from lakeshores.

Whimbrels might also escape detection by flying very high. In May of 2005, I heard some Whimbrels calling overhead, but was unable to locate them. Finally when I looked straight up I saw 3 birds in flight, perhaps a kilometer high. Then on May 24, 2006, I observed 2 Whimbrels flying very high, circling on thermals much like hawks, and gradually moving towards the northwest. These are the only times that I have observed them flying this high.

It is my feeling that more Whimbrels should be found across Alberta than have been in the past. Perhaps more observers need to be aware of their description, habitat preferences, behavior, and calls. The best ways to find Whimbrels are by hearing their loud distinctive calls, and by watching for these large shorebirds which most often fly in line formation. The best time to look for them is in May, starting in early May in southern Alberta, and mid to late May in areas farther north. Seeing and hearing a large flock of Whimbrels would be a memorable experience for anyone.

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### Acknowledgements:

H. Loney Dickson and Gerry Beyersbergen of the Canadian Wildlife Service provided encouragement and data, and Ross Dickson assisted greatly with the literature search, and commented on a previous draft of this article. I also wish to thank the following people who shared their records of Whimbrel sightings with me: Teresa and Doug Dolman and Liz Saunders (Lethbridge), Peter Sherrington, Ross Dickson, and Gus Yaki (Calgary area), Dennis Baresco (Medicine Hat), Judy Boyd (Red Deer), Richard Klauke (Vilna), Margot Hervieux, (Grande Prairie), Bob Parsons (Edmonton), and Alan R. Smith (Saskatoon).

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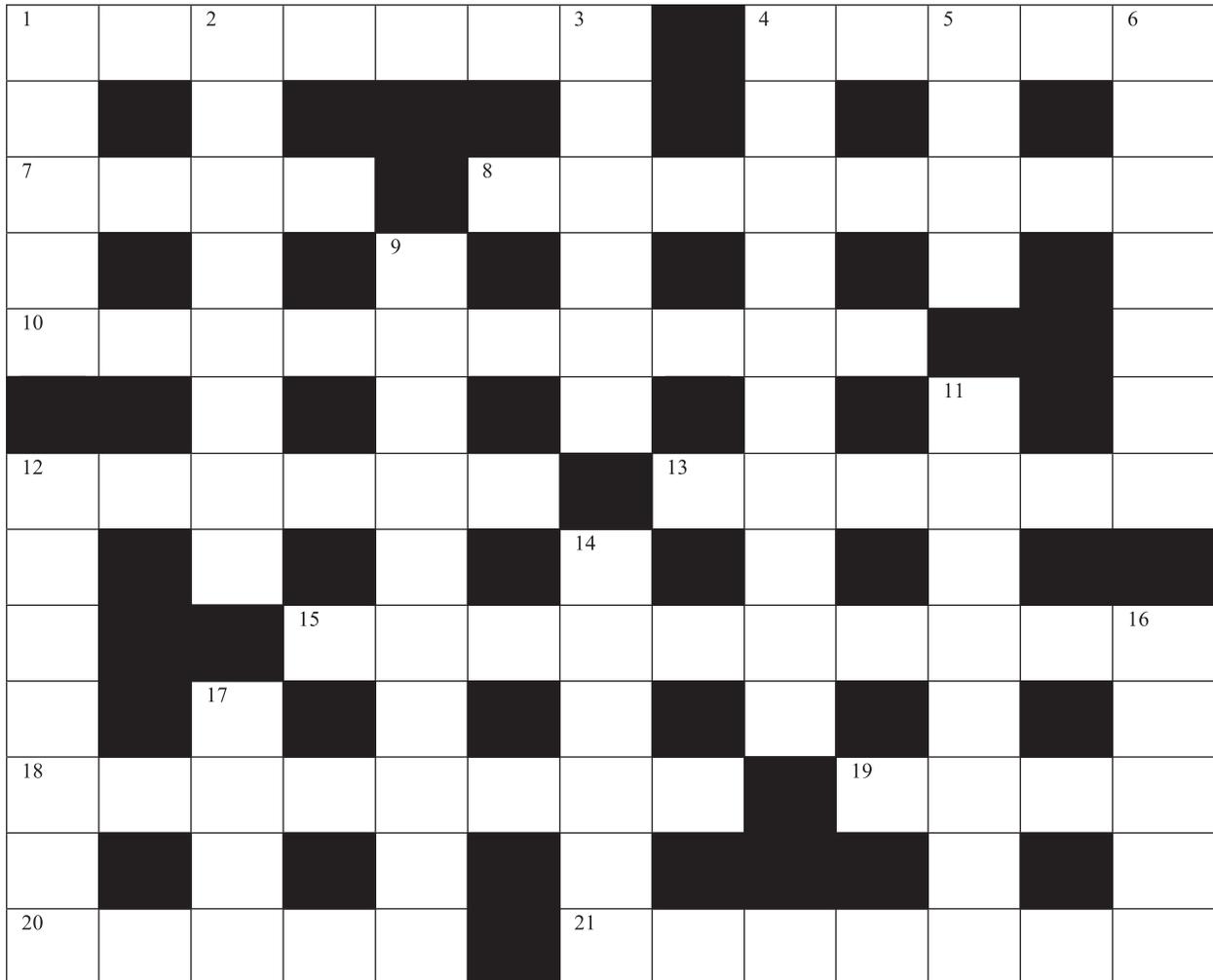
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# NEWTON'S OCCASIONALLY CRYPTIC CROSSWORD! #1

Time to test your nature knowledge in what will be a regular feature of Nature Alberta – but you should know that author Garry Newton has a sly wit and often a cryptic mind.



## ACROSS

1. Grassy stems in ordered arrangements (7)
4. Original loony? (5)
7. All of them are charged (4)
8. Plenty of these in chocolate cake (8)
10. This bird would be a good mascot for a baseball team (10)
12. Is lox a mixed-up decorative plant? (6)
13. Wonder-working raptor (6)
15. An intelligent, but ill-natured bird (4, 6)
18. Some of the flight feathers (8)
19. Grass-pollinator (4)
20. Parkland tree (5)
21. What Lucy McGillvray and Grace Wilson have in common (7)

## DOWN

1. A corpse? Well, certainly rigid (5)
2. Yet you might see a storm petrel on one (5, 3)
3. Even now you might be able to spot a Dodo, but only at one of these (6)
4. Favorite desert of the Brant? (10)
5. Nothing here (4)
6. Those on a diet had better do this when it's time for dessert (7)
9. Makes your mouth water (10)
11. Such a deposit may fan out from a mountain gorge (8)
12. This plant can cause pain, but can also take pain out (7)
14. Canaries can be so described, yet they are sometimes pugnacious (6)
16. Senior tree (5)
17. Remember to carry your binoculars in a good one of these. (4)

Answers will be in the Summer issue, which will give you lots of time to get them all!

## CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

# Starry Nights

## Spring/Summer (May to July)

BY JOHN MCFAUL

**FEATURED CONSTELLATION - LEO**

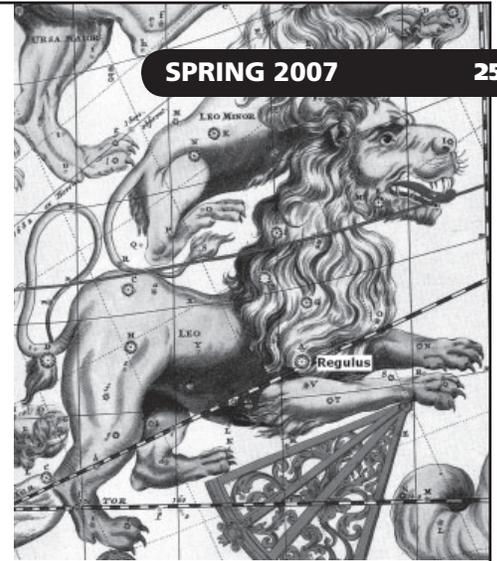
Leo the Lion roars on to the spring celestial stage. Lying to the south of the Big Dipper, Leo is one of the few of the 88 constellations that resembles the creature after which it was named. A line drawn through the two stars at the back of the bowl will lead you down to the bright star called *Regulus*. This is the brightest star in Leo. (Note: Saturn is currently a little to the west of *Regulus*.) The name *Regulus* ("little king") was coined by Copernicus. In Latin it was known as *Cor Leonis*: "The Lion's Heart."

*Regulus* is the dot of a backward facing "?". This asterism is known as the Sickle. An asterism is a grouping of stars that form a recognizable shape, but does not constitute an official constellation. Combining the Sickle with a triangle of stars to the east produces the outline of the lion - a shape that is similar to the lions that guard the Centre Street Bridge in Calgary. This constellation is thought to represent the Nemean Lion that was killed by Hercules as the first act of his 12 labors.

If you scan slightly to the east of Leo's tail with a pair of binoculars, you will see a loose cluster of stars known as Mel 111. This cluster was once thought to represent the tuft of hair at the tip

of the Lion's tail. Officially, it is in the constellation *Coma Berenices*. This constellation represents the beautiful hair of Berenice, the daughter of the king of Cyrene, who became the Queen of Egypt upon marrying Ptolemy III in the 3rd century BC. It is here that you look out toward the north pole of our galaxy. Because you are looking away from the plane of the Milky Way, there are not as many bright stars to see in this area of the sky.

*Regulus* lies very close to the ecliptic, which is the path that the



Sun takes across the sky. At the time of the ancient Egyptians, the Sun was in Leo during the annual flooding of the Nile. Thus the Egyptians did worship the stars of Leo. Over the next year, the Moon will pass very close to *Regulus* on a number of occasions as it travels its monthly journey amongst the stars.

Leo is famous as the constellation from which the Leonid Meteor Shower appears to originate. It takes place on November 17th every year. Every 33 years, this shower becomes a storm as many hundreds to thousands of meteors may be seen every hour. This last occurred in 2001.

**CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS**

- Sun:** Rise - May 1 (06:01 MDT), June 1 (05:13 MDT), July 1 (05:12 MDT)  
Set - May 1 (21:06 MDT), June 1 (21:55 MDT), July 1 (22:09 MDT)  
*Note: Times are for Edmonton.*
- Moon:** Full - May 2, May 31 (Blue Moon), June 30, July 29 *On May 19th watch for the crescent Moon near Venus.*  
New - May 16, June 14, July 14
- Planets:** **Mercury** makes its best evening appearance from late May through early June. Watch for it low in the western sky 30 minutes after sunset.  
**Venus** is a spectacular gem shining in the western sky throughout the spring and early summer. In late June and early July it will appear very close to Saturn. The closest approach occurs on June 30th.  
**Mars** rises in the early hours of the morning sky.  
**Jupiter** can be seen low in the southern sky a couple of hours before midnight.  
**Saturn** is to be found just west of the star *Regulus*, in the constellation Leo the Lion.
- Meteor Shower:** Eta Aquirids, May 5 (before sunrise), 20/hour  
Delta Aquirids, July 28, 20/hour  
*The rate of meteors observed is for dark skies well away from city lights and with no Moon.*

FAN CLUB PAGE



# Big Lake is BLESS'ed!

BY DAVE BURKHART

*The Big Lake Environment Support Society (BLESS) was formed in 1991 by an eclectic group of conservationists for the express purpose of protecting the physical and biotic integrity of Big Lake, its banks, marshes and surrounding wetlands, and the Sturgeon River where it flows through St. Albert.*

The mandate to protect was written into the society's objectives and has remained front and centre, etched in the hearts and dictating the actions of those who have followed.

BLESS is the designated steward of Big Lake under the provincial government's Volunteer Steward program. Over the years, the Society has been successful in obtaining ever-increasing protection for Big Lake, beginning with its designation as an Important Bird Area, its naming as a Special Places site in 2000, and culminating with provincial park status as Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park in 2005. A BLESS committee is currently working at nominating Big Lake for inclusion on the RAMSAR list of Wetlands of International Importance.

Over the years BLESS members have consistently stepped to the plate to engage municipalities,

developers, industry, landowners, governments and politicians of all stripes in defense of our natural area. Threats to the physical and biotic integrity of Big Lake and the Sturgeon River have been incessant. Because of its location – on the front doorstep of a region housing roughly a million people – Big Lake is constantly being bombarded by illogical and destructive road alignments, illegal snowmobile and ATV use, massive leapfrog urban sprawl, excessive upstream water withdrawals, sewage spills, oil and gas exploration and extraction activities, sediments and salt from municipal roads and floodplain infilling. The list sometimes seems endless.

It's no wonder the lake is looking a little ragged around the edges these days, and those who would attempt to preserve and protect it a bit haggard and long in the tooth. Still, the wildlife

keeps coming. In 1995, the north shore of the east bay was home to the first ever Great Egret nest in the area that eventually hatched five fledglings. BLESS members partaking in last year's water quality monitoring programs were treated to the antics of pelicans fishing at the mouth of the Sturgeon River, majestic eagles soaring above the water, grebe nests floating on precarious assemblages of aquatic vegetation, ducks, coots and geese aplenty. Those who trekked on monitoring and cleanup tours last year through the province's newest addition to the park -- twenty hectares of fiddlehead ferns, paper birch forest, old growth spruce and wild orchids at the corner of Edmonton's 199 Street and 137 Avenue -- enjoyed the opportunity to rub shoulders with deer, coyotes, porcupine, beaver and some of the last moose to remain in these parts.

The Society's tasks continue to be many and varied. Underway is an initiative, in conjunction with the



**BLESS AQUATIC DISPLAY AT  
BIG LAKE ON EARTH DAY, 2006**

DAVE BURKHART

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, to install web cameras around the lake. Every year BLESS hosts its Summer Nature Program, our ongoing initiative to mentor budding young naturalists, in the old RCMP log cabin on the banks of the Sturgeon River in St. Albert. Every year we engage the

community by organizing natural area and river bank cleanups, park planning sessions and boundary sign installations, river edge enhancement activities, water quality testing and natural area photo tours. Early in every year, BLESS members participate in a Springing to Life at Big Lake and Earth Day events to

convey to the general public the message of the diverse wildlife and wonderful natural features to be found on our collective doorstep. We welcome active public participation in BLESS. Join us in the enjoyment and preservation of our natural area and provincial park. We can sure use your help.

## Buffalo Lake News

Buffalo Lake Naturalists (BLN) was recently the recipient of a \$700 program-assistance grant from FAN. BLN has ten meetings annually, seven of which include a guest speaker. An interesting and informative program is a key factor in maintaining active clubs and attracting new members. Bringing in guest speakers is a vital part of BLN's indoor program. While members provide meals and accommodation, the grant will allow BLN to offer out-of-area speakers travel costs and honouraria.

Wayne Kinsella is FAN director for BLN, and Irma Simons is the alternate.

## From Sandbars to Sandhills... Uniquely Prairie!

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Leader, Saskatchewan, May 11-13,  
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Registration deadline: April 25.  
Contact: Kerry Wrishko at 306-628-3900 (res), or 306-628-3100 (bus), or e-mail [wrishko.family@sasktel.net](mailto:wrishko.family@sasktel.net)



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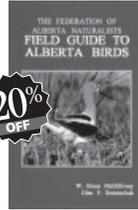
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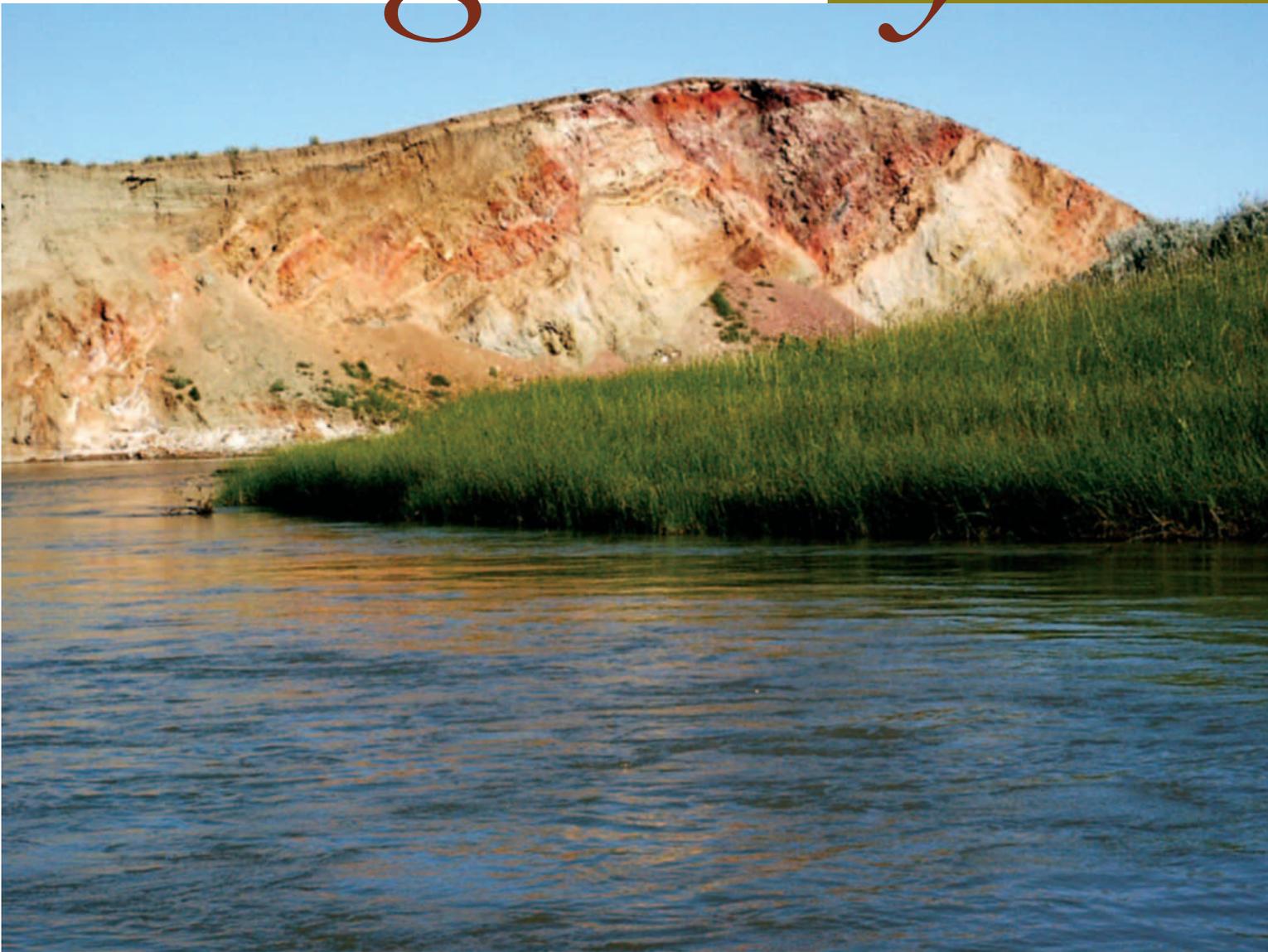
**A PARENT GREAT EGRET ALONG THE NORTH SHORE OF BIG LAKE; THE PAIR HATCHED FOUR CHICKS** JOHN WARDEN

PHOTOGRAPHED ON SEPTEMBER 6, 2005 USING A CANON 20D DIGITAL CAMERA WITH A 75-300MM LENS

**WHAT MAKES DON STILES HAPPY? NATURE – INCLUDING BEING SURROUNDED BY BLUE FLAG** ANDREW STILES



# Nature *gallery*



**AN AWESOME SCENE ON A CANOE TRIP DOWN THE LOWER MILK RIVER** CARITA BERGMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHED ON JULY 27, 2006 USING A MINOLTA DIGIMAGE S414 DIGITAL CAMERA

