

VOLUME 34 | NUMBER 2 | SUMMER 2004

Nature Alberta

ALBERTA'S NATURAL HISTORY REVIEW



MOUNT ASSINIBOINE PROVINCIAL PARK, BRITISH COLUMBIA ANONYMOUS

feature article

Turkey Vultures

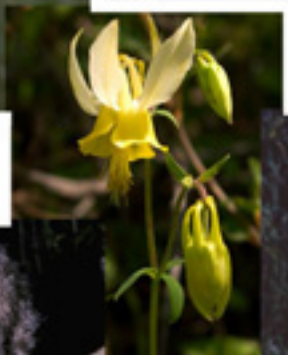
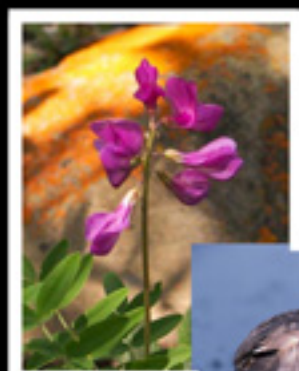
— in East-central Alberta, 2003

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Naturalists usually start in as beginners who have their curiosity aroused about nature: some start very young; others not until late in life. Age does not matter in a naturalist; it is the spirit that counts."

From The Amateur Naturalist by Vinson Brown

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MAY SPECIES COUNT - BIRDS AND MAMMALS. **JULY 15**

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MAY SPECIES COUNT - PLANTS. **JULY 15**

ELAINE GORDON, 15216-74 STREET, EDMONTON, AB T5C 0Y7

COMPILER COOPERATION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

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 between 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

Advocacy is a nice word

BY DENNIS BARESCO

George Monbiot, a writer for The [UK]Guardian, in an article in the June/04 CCPA Monitor, cites four recent "green activist" victories. They all occurred in Britain, but could just as easily happen in Alberta. They are:

1) Though having just received permission to grow genetically modified maize in Britain, Bayer pulled out; Monsanto also announced it is abandoning Europe. 2) The EC ordered the Sellafield nuclear power station to clean up the plutonium it has been dumping into an open pond since the 1950's. 3) Lafarge abandoned its plan to create the world's biggest hole by turning Mount Roineabhal (on the Hebridean island of Harris) into roadstone. 4) The British Foreign Office dropped its objections to a treaty protecting albatrosses from longline fishing.

"Victory," says Monbiot, "against some of the world's biggest corporations was achieved by small groups of local people and roving campaigners, armed with a tiny fraction of their opponents' budgets." Green activists, in fact, are not just the Paul Watsons, Dave Foremans, David Browers and Cliff Wallis' of the world; they include millions of people who take direct action to protect their (usually local or regional) environment.

Taking direct action doesn't necessarily mean tying yourself to a tree or monkey-wrenching a bulldozer, which is the general perception of activism.

Everything from cleaning up a slough to meeting with a government minister to thank, inform, advise or berate him/her is activism.

Advocacy also is a form of activism. It is a positive action, defined (by Thorndike-Barnhardt, briefly) as "speaking in favour; public recommendation; support". It's a word, and action, that naturalists - activists or not - should perhaps make their main focus. Why? Because we can clean up fifty sloughs, or talk to a hundred politicians, but we will seldom get major, long-term victories without at least tacit, broad, public or power support. Governments and corporations, generally not known for altruism or a burning desire to work for the public good, can easily ignore, manipulate or undermine groups which have not built wide support. But build that support and they do listen. As Chuck Colson (of Nixon & Watergate infamy) said: "When you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow."

To clarify, this doesn't contradict Monbiot about the achievements possible by small groups, as these groups often provide the impetus and driving force to get the ball rolling. Also, advocacy shouldn't

be confused with lobbying. The latter is a negative term; a synonym could be "influence-peddling," generally in the form of quasi-legal bribes, payoffs or other promised rewards or threats.

There is a degree of environmental advocacy going on in boardrooms. It is minor but growing, though the mainstream press has, to the point of irresponsibility, under-reported it and over-reported the "nature at the expense of jobs" argument. In his July 8/04, Report on Business column in the *Globe and Mail*, Eric Reguly wrote about four Executives who are advocating action on climate change. In support of their actions it is worthwhile to list them: Lord John Brown, CEO of British Petroleum; Ronald Oxburgh, Chairmen of the British arm of Royal Dutch/Shell Group; John Rowe, CEO of Exelon (Chicago's electricity and natural gas corporation); and Frank Dottori, CEO of the Canadian forest product company, Tembec.

Advocacy is one - arguably the most important - of the naturalist community's tools for reaching our goals. The next question is: how do we advocate? I.e., how do we frame, discuss, and approach any particular issue? That's my next column, but if YOU have any suggestions or comments, drop me a line.

EDITOR'S PAGE

Nature Alberta Well Received

BY BRIAN PARKER



With responses ranging from “..vastly improved!” to “Nature Alberta looks GREAT!!!!... it appears that a large majority of Nature Alberta subscribers enthusiastically support recent changes to this magazine’s format and appearance.

In the long run however, the quality of the written content and photographic images will determine if the new Nature Alberta will be a success. To this end I would again like to request subscribers and other contributors with interesting letters to the Editor, articles or high quality photographs to submit their works for consideration by Nature Alberta.

On more of a naturalist’s bent, my wife and I recently travelled to Manitoba on a short holiday. The weather was cool and wet, as it has been for much of the summer there, and apparently ideal for amphibians. We experienced two interesting amphibian events. First, in the Interlake region, between lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba, we observed literally thousands of frogs on the gravel road between Ashern and Hodgson just after sunset. We stopped our vehicle to determine the species and were surprised to see they were leopard frogs, a species which has experienced

significant declines in abundance on the prairies over the past couple of decades. All of the individuals we observed appeared to be relatively small, recently transformed individuals, no large adults were noted. We have observed only one other similarly large frog movement of this kind, again in Manitoba, when we observed many large adult leopard frogs moving between Lake Manitoba and its shoreline marshes in early spring almost a decade past.

Our second amphibian experience occurred early on a wet morning on our drive back to Edmonton, between the towns of Minnedosa and Russel on the Yellowhead highway. In this case, we noted tiger salamanders crossing the highway in large numbers near many of the larger roadside potholes. Again, because the stumps of larval gills were still visible and most of the salamanders were small, less than 15 cm in length, we presume these were recently

transformed individuals. Several live individuals we approached displayed a classic salamander response to threat by arching their backs and raising their tails as we approached to examine them. Unfortunately this response does them little benefit when being confronted by a car or truck and many salamanders were dying under the wheels of highway vehicles. Such movements tend to occur in late July and August, often after a rainfall, as individuals leave their natal ponds in search of hibernacula to spend the winter. This must be a regular occurrence in those parts of southern Alberta and Saskatchewan that have tiger salamander populations as well. So, if you’re driving through pothole country on a rainy day in late summer, keep an eye out for some of our more primitive quadrupeds. A five-minute break on a long road trip can reveal some fascinating animal behaviour.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor;

For your interest, I am enclosing a remarkable picture of an albino Tree Swallow taken by Shonna McLeod on George Loades Jumping Pound Bluebird trail. George and Shonna are both Calgary Area Bluebird trail monitors.

This is a first for the Calgary Area Bluebird Trail Monitors, which first began in 1980 with only 7 monitors. It has grown over the years to 54 monitors reporting on over 3500 nest boxes. A "monitor" in this case is one or more individuals who look after a bluebird trail, sometimes a couple or a family.



ALBINO TREE SWALLOW. DON STILES

In 2003 they recorded the fledging of over 5000 Mountain Bluebirds and over 9000 Tree Swallows. Calgary Area Bluebird trails are mostly located west of

Calgary from Longview to Sundre, with a few to the east of no. 2 Highway at East Didsbury and in the Drumheller area.

BY DON STILES

Word Search: *Things Aquatic*

Circle the words found below. Words may be horizontal, vertical or diagonal and may be spelled backwards. The remaining letters can be rearranged to answer the following clue:

What scientists collect.

Bathymetry	Oar
Buoy	Ova
Eels	Oxygen
Energy	Plankton
Eye	Pool
Fin	Reefs
Fog	Riffle
Island	Rower
Lakes	Shoal
Limnology	Teal
Liquid	Walleye
Mayfly	
Mud	

Y	L	F	Y	A	M	A	V	O	E
R	Y	O	S	U	S	H	O	A	L
T	R	G	D	N	I	F	A	R	F
E	E	M	O	X	Y	G	E	N	F
M	W	A	L	L	E	Y	E	E	I
Y	O	P	L	A	O	E	Y	E	R
H	R	N	O	T	K	N	A	L	P
T	Y	G	R	E	N	E	M	S	O
A	S	E	D	N	A	L	S	I	O
B	U	O	Y	D	I	U	Q	I	L

SOLUTION FOUND ON PAGE 19

CD Review

Bird Songs – Western Boreal Forest

BY BARB BECK



I have just had the pleasure of reviewing a copy of John Neville's latest CD set, Bird Songs – Western Boreal Forest.

It is a fantastic set. Most of the recordings are from Saskatchewan and Alberta thus the dialects you hear are of birds from our region. In the narration he often gives a little extra insight into the species or the recording. He has not limited himself just to birds. There are a few mammals, including deer and an interesting recording of a black bear, and amphibians common to the boreal soundscape. Some are very interesting. I never realized how much a Green Winged Teal could sound like a jet plane. He also has an excellent recording of the song of the Hawk Owl.

John's recordings sound very natural. On some bird song CD's some of the recordings appear to be of highly agitated birds which have been enticed to vocalize by tape playback. The birds on John Neville's CD set sound like they do when you are just enjoying their song in their natural

surroundings. John has stated that his own philosophy "is to present bird sounds in a way that anyone can recognize them. If more people recognize the critters then more space will be saved and protected for birds. I think knowledge of wildlife is critical for the natural world in an environment dominated by man."

Each species is on a separate track on the CD, which makes access easy. The set is arranged with the more common birds you would encounter first, followed by the following groups of birds and other animals: warblers, sparrows, raptors, shorebirds, waterfowl, marshes,

mammals and rodents, and finally gulls. There are 55 tracks on the first CD and 52 on the second.

My husband and I record natural sounds and realize the tremendous amount of patience and work it takes to get the high-quality clips on this CD set. Each is like a painting of this very special region, a work of art. If you love the boreal forest you will love this CD set and the insights it brings into the sounds of this marvellous region of the world. If you love birds you will enjoy these very fine recordings.



Order from John Neville's Recording web site:
<http://www.nevillerecording.com/>

Price: \$26.00 Canadian.

ALBERTA ISSUES

Public Lands

Alberta Public Lands belong to all Albertans. They are our heritage and legacy. Public Lands are a finite resource, and when they are gone, they are gone.

To protect our Public Lands the Alberta government needs to cancel the Farm Holdings Consolidation Program (FHCP - http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/land/docs/farm_holding.doc), which allows grazing leaseholders and farm development leaseholders in the "White Zone" (non forested areas) to request the sale of up to one section of their leased land through a public tenure process. The leaseholder has the right of last refusal, within 30 minutes of the tender closing, to by matching the highest accepted bid.

The ranching community is opposed to this program. Both Action for Agriculture and the Alberta Land Council argue this policy must be amended to zone the land for agriculture permanently, allow no capital infrastructure for a minimum of 20 years, and restrict it to existing agricultural operations. The agricultural community is concerned about lands being lost to agriculture, where developers or energy companies are seeking hard hit ranchers suffering cash crises to finance deals that take advantage of the leaseholder's right to match the highest bid.

A major concern is that lands need only be advertised locally,

and public lands will be sold without public scrutiny. This is a potential boon to land developers, and to energy companies that may want to begin coal bed methane extraction. As owners of the land, they could do many things that they would not be permitted to do if they had to negotiate with a rancher or farmer, who depends on sound land and water management to support his crops or livestock.

Albertans rejected the Grazing Lease Conversion Policy in the 80's, and if informed prior to implementation of FHCP would probably have rejected this new policy also. This new policy was invoked quietly, and with only last minute notice to leaseholders. It is interesting that while the government insists that every industry stakeholder get input on Recovery Teams like the Grizzly Bear and the Woodland Caribou Recovery Teams, where a policy affects all Albertans, most Albertans are completely shut out.

The FHCP is a major concern for recreationists and conservationists and for all Albertans who use public lands to fish, hunt, watch birds, hike, take photographs and cross

country ski and who could lose those opportunities.

Private lands provide limited or no recreational opportunities for Albertans. The Alberta Fish & Game Association is also concerned that the transformation of privatized lands by the construction of large game fences for game farms, will limit the availability of habitat & corridors for wildlife. No more public lands should be sold, leased or traded. The agricultural industry on existing leases contributes to wildlife habitat and provides access for a variety of activities.

Although the FHCP says the land will not "be made available for sale if it is needed for conservation or other government programs", history has shown that this does not happen. There are many environmentally sensitive areas (ESA's) in the white zone.

It has been less than 2 years since most Albertans were given access to public lands under Bill 16 Agricultural Disposition Statutes Amendment Act, 2003 (Cardinal)
<http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/land/>



“I conceive that the land belongs to a vast family, of which many are dead, few are living, and countless numbers are still unborn.”

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

[APL QandA Recreational.html](#)

The Alberta government has been selling off public lands for many years (81,800 acres from 1993-2002). As well, in the last 5 years (1999-2003), 141,419 acres of vacant public land was assigned as 271 grazing leases.

PUBLIC LANDS SWAPS

Concern has also been raised about public lands swaps. In south-eastern Alberta, in 2002, Alberta Public Lands had discussions with a potato farmer about a trade of unspecified private land for four sections of native prairie grassland utilised by a number of endangered species. When Fish & Wildlife was contacted, they had concerns and advised a wildlife survey be conducted. Surveys were conducted in October, almost guaranteeing no migratory species would be present. The governments' own database showed that burrowing owls, long billed curlew and Swainson's hawk, all species of concern, occurred in the area. Ignoring these facts, it was reported that no species of concern were identified. By June 2003, the individual had ploughed the grasslands, though he had no title to the land. Similarly, it appears that the individual was given a water permit for irrigation. This from a river source that was already fully allocated.

An important concern of the Grasslands Naturalists is that even if private lands are traded

in exchange for public lands of equal conservation value, there is still an irreversible loss of native prairie once the land has been cultivated. No written protocol on land trades apparently exists.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION!

In response to a request for records pertaining to the Alberta Tourism Recreational Leasing Process for small-scale tourism developments (ATRL-Lite), the Alberta Government refused to provide 70 out of 83 pages of documents. Among the reasons given for withholding the documents were that the disclosure would be expected to reveal advice being considered by the Government, disclosure of a pending government policy and that it might affect the financial interests of a third party. Since the ATRL process deals with proposals for tourism developments on public lands, the public should have input into policies the Government is considering and the right to comment on tourism developments being proposed for public lands.

RESIDENTIAL AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

In July 2004, the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench found Alberta Environment's decision to approve the real estate and ski terrain development at Castle Mountain Resort (CMR) without an Environmental Impact

Assessment (EIA) "patently unreasonable", and has ordered the department to reconsider its decision in accordance with the legislation.

"The West Castle Valley is a crucial watershed in southern Alberta. It is also a wildlife corridor which connects wildlife populations in Alberta, B.C. and Montana. While we would have liked the judge to order an EIA, we are happy that the court has recognized the obvious problems with Alberta Environment's decision. Now that the government has been ordered to reconsider their decision in accordance with the legislation we expect the government itself to order the EIA", said Jeffrey Emmett, Executive Director of the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition. "This is a step forward for the environmental protection of the West Castle Valley and the Castle Wilderness. We've defended wildlife and the watershed, and we've also held the government accountable for its decision."

In the north, the Cheviot mine development continues, with the 22 km- 4 lane wide road currently being constructed. Biologist Ben Gadd, and the Sierra Club have taken the company to court, as no Federal environmental impact assessment has been done on this sensitive area (7455 ha of public lands) adjoining Jasper National Park. The previous

ALBERTA ISSUES

Public Lands...continued

Cheviot proposal was not developed due to its poor economics and public opposition. Instead, the parent companies have initiated a fundamentally different mine project and obtained a provincial mine permit for a larger area. By dividing the new mine project into small pieces and getting provincial approvals for one part at a time, the company and Alberta Government have avoided doing an EIA and holding public hearings. For more information see www.sierraclub.ca/national/programs/biodiversity/wilderness/cheviot/index.html

FORESTRY NOTES

Due to a generous grant from The Richard Ivey Foundation, Global Forest Watch Canada has announced the availability of ~4,000 ASTER satellite images (bands 4, 3, 2 — false colour infrared) for much of Canada's forest regions. Please visit globalforestwatch.ca for information and how to order.

INTERNATIONAL ENDANGERED FOREST DESIGNATION

Provincial and international conservation groups have identified three Endangered Forests in the Foothills adjacent to Alberta's Rocky Mountain parks. Endangered Forests are an international designation based on the presence in these areas of intact forest, remnant forest,

habitat for woodland caribou, grizzly bear and bull trout, and old-growth forest. The groups have launched the designation of these areas by producing a document which describes the areas and calls on the Alberta Government, the forestry and oil and gas industry to place a moratorium on new industrial activity until legislated protected areas are established through land-use planning processes (booklet available at: www.cpaws-edmonton.org).

The areas of focus are the Kakwa, Little Smoky, and Bighorn Country.

Groups supporting this moratorium include the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Edmonton Chapter (CPAWS), the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) and the Alberta Wilderness Association, as well as several national and international groups (Sierra Club of Canada, ForestEthics, Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Rainforest Action Network).

The Alberta government has long recognized the values of the areas. Extensive hearings were held in the early 1970s and the resulting government report stated: "...vast tracts of land will be kept in natural and wilderness state. A conservative estimate is that a minimum of 70% of the Eastern Slopes Region will be maintained in present natural or wilderness areas." Although the Foothills account

for almost half of the Eastern Slopes, less than 1% has been set aside from industrial use.

"The designation of these Endangered Forests should signal to government and industry that the international conservation community considers the region to be of special conservation concern," said Glen Semenchuk, FAN Executive Director

In the last three years over 400 companies, including Home Depot, Lowe's, IKEA, and Staples have publicly announced their commitment to protect the world's Endangered Forests by not sourcing wood from those areas until conservation concerns, including the established of protected areas, have been completed through a meaningful land-use planning process.

"Although all of the Central Foothills have been allocated to the forest industry we are encouraged by actions such as the Weyerhaeuser deferral of logging in key caribou habitat. We hope to see other companies such as Canfor, Weldwood and Alberta Newsprint follow that lead, and move towards the protection of these areas," said Walsh. Dianne Pachal, Sierra Club of Canada's Alberta Wilderness Director points to the urgency for action.

"Opportunities to protect the last remnants of our forested wildlands in the Foothills are rapidly disappearing."

Birding in the Castle River Area

BY BOB PARSONS

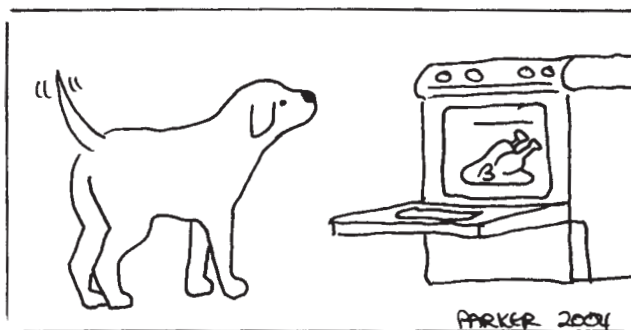
Whilst briefly visiting the Crowsnest Pass a couple of years ago, I came across a map of the Castle River area to the south of the Pass.

After studying some of the region's layout I thought it might be an interesting area to visit, maybe after the annual stop at Waterton, part of the Grassland to Rockland Tour organized by the Edmonton Bird Club. The butterfly experts all considered it a tremendous location, especially as a few rare species have their range limited to just this one area of south-western Alberta. Talking to our birding father figures in town, they all agreed on exceptional habitat, good access to the mountain creek areas as well as a few fairly well maintained campsites. Perhaps they should have mentioned good security too, as the one I picked, Castle River Bridge, was right next to a correctional facility! The campsite was pretty much in the center of the region I was keen to explore and was just up the road from the Castle Mountain Ski Resort area and the adjoining West Castle Wetlands Provincial Ecological Reserve, a wetland pretty unique in a mountainous area such as this. The wetlands were

considered to be a birding hotspot, especially considering their location, a bit out of the way perhaps, unless one was visiting nearby as I was. Anyhow, spending close to 5 days in this part of the province turned out for me to be a very special place and nature memories abound.

Now birding very early in the morning is not a recognized way of life in these parts and setting up a spotting scope on a bridge, overlooking the winding, fast-flowing Castle River and near the rear of the facility is just a little out of the ordinary, especially if you throw in a guard dog running up and down the fenceline. Do not expect a quiet time at 5:30 am in these parts fellow birders and get ready for the dust storm as

vehicles pass by at 80 km/hr! Not a lot of vehicles of course, maybe 3 or 4, but all interested in what is going on — “What are you looking at?” — “Are you lost?”. One fellow even inquired if I “was scouting the joint for a possible breakout?”. “No, I’m just bird-watching”, I replied, eager to get rid of this unwelcome 6:00 am visitor and return to the Cassin’s Finch sitting on top of a spruce nearby. A shift worker presumably on his way into the correctional facility stopped by, and after inquiring about my health and how my day was going, thought it might be a good idea to set up my equipment further down the road as I might be giving some people the wrong impression. No fear of that I thought as I willingly packed up my gear and got ready to move to a quieter spot down the road. Oh, by the way — highlights of the facility included American Dipper, Fox Sparrow, Cassin’s Vireo, Ruffed Grouse and a possible good source of nicely cut firewood, neatly stacked up just inside the low fence!



CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Turkey Vultures in East-central Alberta, 2003.

BY R. WAYNE NELSON, FLOYD KUNNAS, AND DAVID MOORE

They don't have beauty or charisma on their side. They are secretive in their nesting habits. They are sparsely distributed across the countryside. They travel over large areas in their search for food. And, for Alberta birds, they are huge.

Even amongst Alberta birders they are not often seen or recognized. Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) are only moderately well studied elsewhere and are poorly known in Alberta.

Turkey Vultures are large scavengers that have a long nesting period. The two eggs are laid 1-3 days apart, incubation of the eggs takes 38-40 days, and nestlings can first make extended flights at about 60 days of age, from an elevated nest location, or at 70-80 days of age if their nest site is on the ground in woods or is difficult to exit. Kirk and Mossman (1998) provide a review of the biology of this species.

Historically, Turkey Vultures are recorded in Alberta as nesting on an island in Lower Mann Lake and an island in a small unidentified lake near St. Paul (Oeming 1957), apparently into the 1970s (Salt and Salt 1976), under a fallen tree on an island in Astotin Lake in Elk Island National Park in 1919, at Ministik Lake, and at Miquelon Lake until 1944 (Salt and Wilk 1966), and near Cold Lake, Duvernay, and

Big Valley, and south-east of Wainwright (Semenchuk 1992).

This paper records nine successful nesting events in 2003, plus additional observations at the northern edge of this vulture's breeding range, in the area roughly bounded by Chauvin, Smoky Lake, and Cold Lake, Alberta.

METHODS

Since the early 1990s, Fish and Wildlife Division (FWD) staff in east-central Alberta have checked out reports of positive and potential vulture nesting sites and re-visited most of the sites in the following years. Beginning in 1999, we requested the public to report observations of vultures to FWD offices, especially in the Smoky Lake, St. Paul, Bonnyville, and Cold Lake area. In mid-late July and August of each year we attempt to visit newly reported nest sites or suspect nesting locations plus all previously-known nesting locations. In 2001 and 2002 we checked five previously occupied sites and one new nest site but were disappointed

to find only the new site had a nestling. In 2003 several new reports proved positive and resulted in a quite remarkable nesting season. The descriptions below are from 14 nest sites we have monitored to date, all in abandoned buildings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Roosting: From reports spanning 2001 to 2003, there appeared to be a night-roost, of up to 13 vultures, established each evening in conifers on the shoreline of Moose Lake. There also may be a roost at Whitney Lake Provincial Park. Roosting vultures may include one or two year olds, not yet of breeding age, and the non-incubating members from nests in the general area (Kirk and Mossman 1998).

Distribution of nests: In 2003, vulture nests were distributed across east-central Alberta in an area of mixed grain and cattle farming, with considerable tree-cover (Map 1). The southern 2/3 of this area is in the Parkland Natural Region, and the northern 1/3 is in the Dry Mixed-wood portion of the

ESTIMATED 55 DAY OLD
AND 51 DAY OLD
(BACKGROUND) VULTURE
NESTLINGS NEAR HAIRY
HILL, 31 AUGUST 2003.

WAYNE NELSON



MAP 1. LOCATION OF HISTORIC AND 2003 VULTURE NEST SITES.

Boreal Natural Region. Perhaps this part of Alberta has the preponderance of the province's nesting vultures because there is a sufficient number of out-of-the-way livestock, road-killed deer, and other carcasses that are associated with wooded areas.

Productivity: In 2003 eight of the nine Alberta nests held two nestlings and one nest held one nestling.

Northern-most nesting site of Turkey Vultures: The most northerly published nesting site was in Alberta, under bushes on an island in Lower Mann Lake at 54°10'N, 111°32'W (Oeming 1957). In the 1970s Richard Klauke found an active vulture nest on the ground on a hillside overlooking Hall's Lagoon in Cold Lake Provincial Park at about 54°28'N, 100°08'W. This may be the northern-most nesting record for this species. In 2003, we were taken to an active nesting site in an old barn at 54°23'N, 110°51'W. The latter appears to be the most northerly nesting record of recent years.

Environmental setting of nests: We know of only one natural nesting site used by vultures within our study area in the past 20 years; in the 1980s Helen and Phil Trefry found a nest in a brush pile in woods by the bank of the Battle River near

Fabyan. We look forward to visiting more such sites, to compare them with the nests we have seen in buildings.

According to neighbors, some years ago vultures nested repeatedly in the upper floor of a large farmhouse that was at least 50 metres from the nearest trees (they abandoned that site after nestlings were killed by vandals). In contrast, in recent years all of the buildings where we found vulture nests were close to, or partly or fully surrounded, by trees. In general, entrances to nesting buildings either faced away from roadways, a common source of disturbance near nest sites, or were sheltered from view by a screen of trees.

The vulture site closest to human habitation was well screened by woods from the home about 0.8 km (0.5 mile) away. All of the other sites were 1.6 km (1 mile) or more from the nearest occupied dwellings and not in direct sight of any.

Turkey Vultures in east-central Alberta, 2003...continued

Access into buildings: The vultures' entry into most nest buildings was by a window or small attic door or through openings caused by missing roof shingles. One farm shed could be accessed by a window on one side and an open door on the other side, but to enter the loft the vultures somehow flew almost straight up through a 1x3 metre opening in the ceiling and immediately made a right angle turn into the 1 metre high loft. At an attic nest we think the adults and young must have flown almost straight up to exit through the small window 2 metres above the floor.

Nest microhabitat in

buildings: Most nests were in the attics or second story rooms of old farmhouses, one was in the loft of a farm shed, one was in a manger on the main-floor of an intact barn. An old house had its vulture nest on the main floor, in a "cave" in piled lumber.

Half of the nest locations were in dull or almost dark locations that required us to use flashlights but the remaining nests were moderately or well illuminated because of windows or missing doors or roof shingles. The location of the original nest scrape in many instances was not evident at our visit, however, in several cases the scrape or placement of small nestling-sized droppings showed a preference for corners and/or near where the attic floor met the sloping roof.

The substrate of the nest scrape was pigeon manure (5 cases), wood shavings (insulation in an attic; 1 case), leaves, straw, and dust (1 case), straw in a manger (1 case), and unknown debris in the other cases. In two of the 2003 cases, it appeared that the attics had not been occupied previously by young vultures, because of the distribution and whiteness of the whitewash from the current nestlings as seen on the attic floor, debris, and joists.

Behavior of vultures at nest visits:

We echo Houston and Terry's (2003) observations and cautions, especially that visits to vulture nest sites should not exceed one hour. Because human scent trails may attract predators to vulture nests that can be reached via missing doors and existing stairs, consideration should be given to, on departure, spreading moth crystals on the last part of one's trail to the nest site (Hamerstrom 1970).

Vultures are secretive birds. Parent vultures often are not seen when the nest building is visited, even when nestlings are present. Sometimes parents arrived, spotted us, and left, and returned after we had vacated the area. At one suspected nest-site two vultures circled low over us as we arrived at the historically occupied building, but despite a thorough search of the farmstead we could find no nestlings or evidence of nesting in the current year. In a second

instance a pair was seen perched on the roof of a house in an abandoned farmstead and circled low overhead for a number of minutes while we searched the house and farmstead. No sign of a nest was located although a recently fledged young was located on a subsequent visit. Sometimes the noise of our approach caused the nestlings to give a loud defensive hiss before they could see us, but at other sites, even when we were close and in view, the nestlings were quiet.

The vultures' season in

Alberta: For the 2003 season, Table 1 shows the estimated ages of the nestling vultures at our visits and the estimated dates for egg laying, hatching, and fledging.

Jackson (1983) suggested that incubation begins with the laying of the second egg. That should result in synchronous hatching. Although females vultures are somewhat larger than males, it is not clear that males feather and fledge more quickly, as in most raptors. In most of our broods, the feathering of one nestling was conspicuously several days advanced. Perhaps northern vultures do not hatch synchronously, or perhaps a food-begging hierarchy was established between the synchronously hatched nestlings and one was better fed than the other in each brood.



A LONG-ABANDONED FARMHOUSE SURROUNDED BY ASPEN REGROWTH NEAR ERNESTINA LAKE. VULTURES ENTERED A SECOND STORY BEDROOM THROUGH A WINDOW AT THE OPPOSITE END OF THE HOUSE WAYNE NELSON

Human neighbors of one vulture site reported their first sighting on 18 April 2003. At another site, in the early morning of 29 September 2003 RWN saw the two fledgling vultures perched again in the window of their nest building, approximately 20 days after they first flew, and their human neighbors last recorded them in the area on 30 September.

Protection of abandoned farm buildings: In the past decade three of our vulture buildings were removed. This is a common fate of many older farm buildings. Although all of these buildings eventually will collapse, in the modern agricultural landscape there are no equivalent replacement nest sites. We thus ensure that all landowners with vulture buildings are aware that vultures

are using or have used their buildings, and we encourage them to leave these buildings undisturbed for vultures and other wildlife.

FUTURE STUDIES

Request for east-central

Alberta vulture sightings: We continue to seek vulture nest sites in east-central Alberta.

Please report to the authors - contact information below - all sightings of Turkey Vultures, and especially nests or suspected nests, within the study area shown in Map 1.

If 15-20 active nests can be found, and if nest fidelity is relatively high among years, monitoring these nest sites may provide an index of the productivity and health of the vulture population and the health of their environment. While monitoring a fixed number of nest sites might detect a decline, we also need to detect any new nest sites in order to confirm a population increase. We suspect the local vulture population is increasing, just as the Common Raven, Osprey,

TABLE 1. PRODUCTIVITY AND PHENOLOGY OF FIVE TURKEY VULTURE NESTS IN EAST-CENTRAL ALBERTA IN 2003.

Nest Site	Date of visit	No. of nestlings	Age of nestlings ¹	Est. date of Egg ¹	Est. date of hatching ²	Est. date of fledging ²
Beaver River	15 Aug	2	60, 60	5 May	16 June	15 Aug
Elk Point	15 Aug	2	57, 60	5 May	16 June	18 Aug
Ernestina Lake	13 Aug	2	51, 53	10 May	21 June	22 Aug
Angling Lake	13 Aug	2	42, 46	17 May	28 June	31 Aug
Hairy Hill	12 Aug 31 Aug	2	ca. 32 51, 55	26 May	7 July	9 Sept

¹ Compared with known-age photographs in Ritter (1983).

² Date of first egg and hatching are based on the estimated age of the oldest nestling. Date of fledging is based on the estimated age of the youngest nestling. Dates were calculated assuming a clutch of 2 eggs laid 2 days apart, incubation lasting 40 days from the second egg, and first flight occurring at 60 days of age.

Turkey Vultures in east-central Alberta, 2003...continued

Bald Eagle, and Cougar have been increasing in parts of this area in recent years.

Reporting wing-tagged

Turkey Vultures: We hope to expand Stuart Houston and Brent Terry's Saskatchewan vulture wing-tagging program into Alberta in 2005. Wing-tagging allows vultures to be individually identified with binoculars or a telescope. Studying marked vultures has tremendous potential for increasing our knowledge of the population dynamics and behavioral ecology of these interesting birds. The wing tags are similar to the large ear tags used on cattle. One flap of the tag is visible on the upper surface of the wing, whether the wing is open or closed, and the other flap is visible from beneath when the wing is open. The Saskatchewan wing tags are on the right wing and are green with white letters and/or numbers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks to the public and FWD staff for vulture reports and assistance. We also thank

landowners for permission to search old buildings and their enthusiastic support for the vultures.

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FK, as above except: Tel. (780) 645-6405; E-mail: floyd.kunnas@gov.ab.ca.

DM, Wildlife Management, FWD, #8, 4701 - 52 Street, Vermilion, AB T9X 1J9; Tel. (780)853-8137; Fax (780) 853-8264; E-mail: dave.moore@gov.ab.ca.

Please report all sightings of wing-tagged vultures to the Bird Banding Office (1-800-327-BAND) and report green wing tags to Stuart Houston at (306) 244-0742 or houstons@duke.usask.ca.



Environment Platforms for the 2004 Provincial Election

Considering there is an upcoming provincial election and that subscribers might be interested in the environmental platforms of the three major provincial political parties in Alberta (Progressive Conservative [PCP], Liberal [LP] and New Democratic [NDP]), the Editor invited each, by telephone call and e-mail, to submit a 1000 word article on their environmental policy for publication in this issue of Nature Alberta.

The Editor received responses from the LP and NDP, but received neither a reply nor an article from the PCP.

In an effort to ensure balanced coverage, the Editor contacted the PCP twice in early September to offer a final opportunity to submit an article. The Editor did not receive a telephone or written response to this request. In order that subscribers inform themselves of PCP policies the Editor suggests subscribers contact the PCP directly.

The LP and NDP contributions are printed here:

Alberta Should Lead the Way in Environmental Protection



LAURIE BLAKEMAN, ALBERTA LIBERAL ENVIRONMENT CRITIC

Alberta's economic prosperity is the envy of the rest of Canada. Albertans have worked hard to make this province a success but we must always remember that our wealth is due in large part to luck. We have the natural bounty under our feet to thank for much of our success.

In spite of this success, Alberta faces a serious challenge. We depend on natural resource revenue, but we also depend on fertile land, plentiful water and clean air for our very survival. That's why the Alberta Liberal Opposition believes that protecting our environment must be a top priority of all government decision-making. Alberta should be a leader in environmental stewardship.

No natural resource is more precious to our future than

water. Oil is what we're famous for, but our absolute dependence on water makes Alberta no different from anywhere else. We are committed to making a full inventory of this province's ground water resources. This is a crucial first step in ensuring that Alberta can plan its water needs into the future.

We are opposed to bulk water sales and inter-basin water transfers. We would also bring a halt to the use of fresh water for oil extraction. There are alternative practices for injection that do not require fresh water use, such as enhanced oil recovery using carbon dioxide.

Climate change is another major challenge facing Alberta and the world. The Alberta Liberals believe that the potential consequences of climate change

Environment Platforms...continued

– such as drought and other severe weather – cannot be ignored. Alberta must do its part to avert these potentially damaging effects. However, tackling climate change is not all about sacrifices.

Increasing energy efficiency reduces greenhouse gases and offers savings to both consumers and businesses. Growing demand for cleaner energy sources such as solar and wind power and the development of new energy technologies will also lead to economic growth and job creation. The Alberta Liberals would create a revolving fund to help Albertans make their homes more energy efficient. The fund would provide low-interest loans that would be paid back over time with the money saved on energy bills. Just 0.5% of our royalty revenues would create a fund of \$20 million.

The Alberta Liberals believe there are also other innovative solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Among the possibilities that need to be examined are:

- Storing CO₂ underground, including in exhausted oil wells. This would also provide industry a supply of CO₂ to help recover oil from wells.
- Coal-bed methane enhancement with CO₂. This technique assists in recovering valuable methane from coal deposits while storing CO₂ underground.

Albertans must also recognize the potential risks and pay-offs of

newly emerging energy sources. One of those is Coal Bed Methane (CBM). CBM is natural gas found in coal seams. It is extracted by drilling multiple wells into coal seams and allowing the gas to flow to the surface. During CBM extraction, water may be used, and this water contains contaminants. In Colorado's experience with CBM, methane leaked into local water wells. Water from CBM extraction also leaked out and with its high mineral content made the local land uncultivable. We should learn some lessons from the American experience before proceeding with CBM development here.

There are currently about 1000 CBM wells in Alberta. They've been dubbed "experimental" by Alberta Energy, meaning they don't have to undergo environmental impact assessments. The Alberta Liberal Opposition believes that all CBM developments should undergo comprehensive environmental impact assessments.

Another new energy source that is seeing increasing exploration is sour gas. Sour gas is natural gas containing high levels of hydrogen sulphide (H₂S), which is highly toxic. Newly developed technology has increased the economic viability of removing sulphur from the sour gas, resulting in 'sweet' gas that is safe for distribution through existing natural gas networks.

However, there is little consensus on the possible risks to humans

and animals from low-level exposure to sour gas. Despite this uncertainty, considerable sour gas development continues. We are very concerned about the proliferation of sour gas wells in and around populated areas. We would fund a comprehensive scientific study to determine the impact of sour gas flaring on human and animal health.

We would also ensure that sour gas wells are developed at a safe distance from populated areas. Currently, a petroleum company is seeking to drill three sour gas wells on the outskirts of southeast Calgary. The company wants the usual required emergency-planning zone reduced. That would put 300,000 Calgary-area residents within the evacuation zone that energy regulations normally insist upon. The Alberta Liberals are firmly opposed to loosening safety and environmental standards for the sake of quick profits.

Protecting the environment shouldn't only be about ensuring human safety and the sustainability of our livelihoods. The Alberta Liberals' environmental policy also recognizes this province's natural heritage and the desire of most Albertans to see that heritage preserved for decades to come.

We are committed to ensuring that unique environmental areas in the province are protected from development. We are supportive in principle of the government's effort to designate these areas as Special Places; however, we oppose the encroachment of

Environment Platforms...continued

development in these places. We oppose development in the Whaleback area. It's also time to call a halt to development in the Evan Thomas region in the Kananaskis Valley and to ensure that the Bighorn Wildland is protected.

All Albertans will lose if we sacrifice the long-term health of these precious environmental gems for the short-term gain of a few developers. We believe that the government is merely a caretaker of the province, and for that reason, should strive to

leave the environment in a better condition than they find it.

The Alberta Liberals offer an alternative vision of environmental protection. We are looking forward to sharing that alternative with as many Albertans as possible over the coming weeks and months.

The New Democratic Party's Commitment to the Environment

NDP  **NDP**

RAJ PANNU, MLA, ENVIRONMENT CRITIC

Alberta's New Democrat Party has a long history of support for environmentally sustainable practices and policy, and – more importantly – a proven record of standing by these policies. Our ideas and proposals have been developed in close consultation with and the cooperation of environmental organizations and activists throughout Alberta. The New Democrat Opposition has introduced private members' bills to protect the environment. In fact, the first bill I introduced was Bill 237, *The Endangered Species and Habitats Protection Act*, 1998.

At the annual convention of the Alberta New Democrats in November 2003, delegates debated and passed several important additions to our environmental policy. These resolutions were the result of the hard work and diligence of the party's Environment Caucus, and the strong links between the Alberta New Democrats and

activists within the environmental movement. I am grateful for this opportunity to share some of the proposals and policies the New Democratic Party is bringing forward to combat global warming and sour gas flaring and venting, ensure responsible development of coal-bed methane resources, protect our forests, and fight to protect Alberta's increasingly scarce freshwater.

The New Democrats were the first party in Alberta to support the Kyoto Protocol as a blueprint for arresting climate change through global cooperation. We have been strong and consistent in our condemnation of the Alberta's inaction on climate change. I have worked closely with my colleague and new Leader of the New Democrats, Brian Mason, to dispel the myths and misconceptions perpetuated by Kyoto opponents.

The Alberta Research Council recently found that sour gas flaring only fully combusts 64 to

85 percent of harmful chemicals and leaves 250 chemicals, including known carcinogens, to circulate in our air. It's no wonder that more and more farmers and other residents living near flares report health problems for themselves, their children, and their livestock. Given that the Pembina Institute estimates that there are more than 5,200 active gas flares in Alberta, flaring and venting of gas wells represents a serious environmental and public health concern.

The Alberta New Democrats are committed to establishing a Council on Gas Flaring Elimination. This council would make regulations regarding the threshold volume for solution gas flaring and oversee the implementation of a 10-year reduction plan. The ultimate goal is to eliminate flaring entirely. In keeping with this goal, NDP Leader Brian Mason introduced Bill 203, *The Gas Flaring*

Environment Platforms...continued

Elimination Act, 2002, in the Legislature. The act was defeated by Conservative MLAs, but received a tremendous amount of support from Albertans concerned about keeping the environment clean and safe.

Many of those supporters have been quick to raise warning flags about the development of coal-bed methane (CBM). I am keenly aware of the environmental devastation caused by production of CBM in the US and committed to seeing that such a disastrous experience isn't repeated in Alberta. Alberta's New Democrat Party is proposing that strict conditions be met before any new development of CBM. Of course, the best way to avoid pollution from the production of CBM is to encourage conservation of existing energy resources and the promotion of sustainable energy alternatives. However, where CBM is produced, there must be strict and well-researched regulations to ensure the environmental costs are minimized or eliminated.

As a first step, the Alberta New Democrat Party is committed to undertaking thorough consultation with all those who may be affected – directly or indirectly – by CBM-related pollution. This includes distribution of all environmental analyses for well approvals. We would also formulate regulations based on analyses of the impact of CBM development in a particular region, as well as the potential cumulative impact of

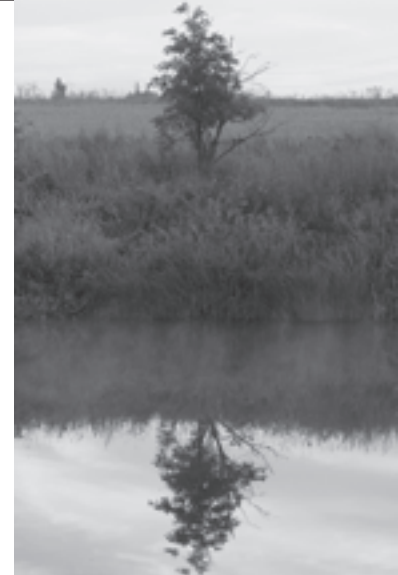
CBM development. Further, the onus would be placed on industry participants to use the best available technologies to minimize any environmental impacts.

Likewise, the New Democratic Party and the New Democrat Opposition are committed to protect our forest heritage. Albertans deserve a government that would act decisively to end over-cutting in Alberta forests, ensure forest management tenures are based on ecosystem planning and, where feasible, would re-establish forests on former timber lands.

The Alberta New Democratic Party would implement sustainable forest practices to ensure a progressive and prompt transition from large-block clearcutting to a variety of more selective harvesting methods that are more suitable to local forest ecosystems.

We would also promote the biodiversity of all forests, but particularly protected areas. The Alberta New Democrats would also enhance the long-term health of all forests by putting in place regulations that result in continuous improvement in reducing pulp mill pollution.

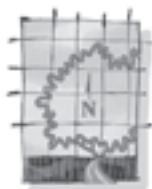
Of course, all of these measures will be for nothing if Albertans are unable to protect our freshwater resources. The New Democratic Opposition recognizes that water is essential to the well-being of Albertans and that surface and



groundwater are undervalued and misused resources in our province. Practical measures to protect our water supply include banning bulk exports of fresh water and inter-basin transfers. We would also move rapidly to eliminate the use of potable water for recovery of natural gas, oil or coal-bed methane. We also envision a strengthened Department of the Environment to lead in the development of research to describe and monitor all river basin ecosystems and the watersheds that effect them. We would also appoint an Environmental Auditor to broadly review and report upon misuse of endangered natural resources such as water.

During my time as Leader of the Alberta New Democrats I am proud to have worked closely with numerous environmental organizations and activists to develop policies that were both environmentally sound and responsible. Our new Leader, Brian Mason, shares my dedication to sound environmental stewardship and he will continue working closely with interested Albertans to build a sustainable environmental future.

FAN CLUBS PAGE



Crooked Creek Conservancy
Society of Athabasca

FAN's Newest Associate Club

The Crooked Creek Conservancy Society of Athabasca (CCCSA) formed in 1996 in response to local residents' concerns about increased logging of crown and private land in the central and southern mixed-wood boreal region surrounding Athabasca, Alberta. Old timers who remembered the land and forest of years ago were especially concerned with the rapidly diminishing areas of wildlands and wildlife habitat. For that reason, CCCSA was established on the principles of nature restoration, conservation, and preservation.

Initially, CCCSA sponsored public information meetings that introduced government programs and policies to offer assistance to individuals with conservation goals. Examples include gift giving and estate planning, farm management of riparian areas, and responsible lake-lot shoreline practices. On occasion members attended workshops and conferences such as the Caring for Our Land and Water Conference, participated in discussions on conservation easement draft legislation and made submissions such as to the MLA Farm Property Tax Assessment Review. With added experience, the Conservancy has become better equipped to carry out its own members' land conservation goals and to assist others with similar needs. Advising landowners to recognize the value of a property's remaining important natural

features; promoting protection and restoration of biodiversity and natural values of land through private land conservancy; and encouraging individuals to contribute financially towards the purchase of ecologically sensitive and significant property for wildlife habitat protection are daunting challenges within the boreal region. The boreal is not yet recognized as an important ecosystem worthy of protection measures relative to other regions of Canada.

When conservation easement legislation came into effect, CCCSA assessed its role in conservation easements as a tool for habitat protection. National nature conservation organizations such as Nature Conservancy of Canada consider the boreal as low priority. The Alberta Conservation Association is reviewing its conservation easement involvement. Local and regional associations now have additional responsibilities to meet the increased demands of conservation easements.

To best understand our region of the boreal forest, CCCSA undertook a biophysical inventory of a selected site four years ago. The 11 km² study area was selected to document vegetation, flora (primarily vascular plants), and vertebrates, at both the species and ecosystem scales and to highlight the area's significant features. Animal counts revealed 179

species of birds, 35 species of mammals and 3 amphibian and 4 fish species. Three hundred and five species of native vascular plants have been identified to date, and of the vascular and non-vascular plants, ten are designated rare. CCCSA's extensive survey report will be published this fall.

CCCSA is a charitable, not-for-profit volunteer organization looking for new enthusiastic members to help promote community awareness, education, and stewardship of wildlife habitat and conservation areas. Through a donation of land, it has established the Bissell Park Nature Reserve, a 3 acre site on the Athabasca River in the Town of Athabasca. An example of its public involvement is the three day Karvonen Nature Film Festival held in Athabasca in 2004 and its donation of Karvonen nature films to area schools and libraries. CCCSA is now fund-raising to assist in the Finnish-Canadian film production about the circumpolar bears of Canada, Alaska, Russia, and Finland. This one-hour documentary is scheduled to be aired on Discovery Channel in 2005. The Conservancy has also produced bird and mammal lists and funded the production of butterfly and dragonfly lists for this region.

For more information write to Crooked Creek Conservancy Society of Athabasca, P.O. Box 2072 Athabasca AB T9S 2B6 or contact Harvey Scott 780-675-4158 (harveys@telusplanet.net).

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Nature *gallery*



**32 DAY OLD TURKEY VULTURE NESTLING IN THE ATTIC OF AN ABANDONED FARMHOUSE
NEAR HAIKY HILL ALBERTA** R. WAYNE NELSON

PHOTOGRAPHED ON AUGUST 12, 2003, USING A PENTAX K-1000 CAMERA, PENTAX-A F1.4 50MM LENS, VIVITAR 2800 FLASH, AND KODAK GOLD FILM.



The Federation
of Alberta Naturalists