

CASTLE WILDERNESS NEWS

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Royalty Supports Park Creation

by Judy Huntley

Royalty has lent its voice to the Andy Russell - Iltai sah kòp Park initiative. The Wildland Park proposed for southwest Alberta in tribute to the Peigan Nation, Andy Russell and his wife Kay has received a boost from His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh (Prince Philip), President Emeritus of World Wildlife Fund International. There have also been positive letters from the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and the Minister of Economic Development replying to a letter sent by a group of notable Canadians. Conservation groups have just received a letter from the Premier's office indicating that the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development has been asked to follow up with them and to keep the Premier informed of those discussions. The groups had forwarded Prince Philip's letter to Premier Klein, along with their request for a meeting to discuss the progress of the tribute.

In response to a joint letter from the locally based Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition and the Sierra Club of Canada, Prince Philip writes, "I understand that WWF Canada has supported

work to help protect this magnificent area of wilderness, and I know that it shares your enthusiasm for such a permanent legacy. I can only hope that the appropriate action to bring about this desirable proposal will be taken as soon as possible."

Some of you may recall that it was in response to the WWF's Endangered Spaces Campaign, championed by Prince Philip in 1989, that the Honourable Ralph Klein, as Alberta's Minister for the Environment, launched his *Special Places 2000: Alberta's Natural Heritage* document at the Joint Ministers meeting in Quebec in November 1992. The Castle was listed as a site that was backlogged for Park protection at the time, and Alberta's failure to protect it through the Special Places program contributed to the WWF's "F" rating of Alberta in 1998. The Castle remains unprotected today, but we hope not for much longer. •

Stewards and Hikers Wanted!

CCWC is calling all stalwart members to join the ranks of stewards and hikers in the Castle Wilderness. The hikes take you on various journeys through these thousand square kilometres, sometimes high, far, and very energetic, and sometimes more quietly and closer to home, enjoying the birds and flowers. Taking on the role of steward gives you a chance to seriously help to keep the Castle wild.

Please consider becoming a hike leader or a steward this year, or suggest a new route, by contacting James Tweedie at 403 628 2422 or tweedie@telusplanet.net.

The 2006 hiking schedule is shaping up for another great year of hikes in the Castle. Mark your calendars for the ones we already have scheduled, opening on May 20 with the early season birds and flowers outside the Castle on Antelope Butte; June 10, Tapay Ridge; June 24, Big Sagebrush Natural Area; July 8, Suicide Creek; July 15, Syncline Trails; July 22, Lost Creek; and Aug 26 Table Mtn/Whistler Ridge. Watch the website for the complete schedule.

Cross-Country Skiing in the Castle-Crown

Looking for peaceful cross-country skiing in the Westcastle Valley? The Syncline Cross-country ski trail system offers a variety of trail loops on easy terrain away from the disturbance of snowmobiles, with the chance of sighting winter birds and wildlife. For up-to-date conditions, call Dave McNeill, Coordinator for the Syncline Cross-Country Ski Trails, at 403-627-3476.

For more adventurous sub-alpine skiing, Waterton Lakes National Park offers exceptional trails and reliable snow conditions from the staging area at Little Prairie below Cameron Lake. Call WLNP in business hours for information on snow conditions and avalanche dangers, 403-859-5133. •

—James Tweedie



Judy Sheppard on the Vicki Ridge hike in 2005.

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Upcoming Meeting

Members are welcome to attend board meetings. Please contact the office if you wish to be notified.

Newsletter

Editor: Judy Huntley.
This newsletter welcomes comments and/or submissions from members and others. Please send submissions by mail or e-mail to the office. Please check with the office for submission deadlines.

The opinions, evaluations, claims and assertions contained in articles appearing in the Castle Wilderness News are the responsibility of their authors, and may not reflect the policies of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition. The office takes responsibility for articles, notices, etc., for which an author is not identified.

Production: Murray Coppold. Thanks to Rosemary Coppold, who addresses, stamps, stuffs and mails the newsletter to you.

Donations to CCWC are tax creditable and greatly appreciated.

Annual General Meeting

CCWC will hold its 2006 AGM in the newly remodeled meeting room in the Lebel Mansion on Saturday May 27 from 10:30 to 2:30, with a short hike—and perhaps a speaker—to follow. More details will follow in the next newsletter. Anyone wishing to offer suggestions or join the planning committee, please contact the office at 403 627 5059 or office@ccwc.ab.ca.

Please plan to come, and consider joining the Board of Directors.

Executive Director's Notes

by Judy Huntley

We apologize to anyone who was unable to access our internet site for a time.

CCWC warmly thanks the Lethbridge Community Foundation for its support providing needed computer equipment which will make it possible to take the Castle Wilderness message around much more broadly

One of the points in Minister Coumts' reply to our request for the Wildland-Provincial Park is that it is necessary to demonstrate the value of the park to the surrounding district. We are therefore conferring with the MD of Pincher Creek and other organizations to bring that information forward. One aspect of the process will be to host or co-host a public information session. Keep an eye out for advertising, and if you can point me to good recent pertinent studies, please do.

CCWC did some water stewardship work in the summer of 2005. This year we will get more involved with the new Alberta Stewardship Network, assisting in gathering information and making it publicly available. Let us know if you'd like to be involved with this project.

We are sorry that hunting groups as well as off-road vehicle enthusiasts have chosen to push back against the proposed Wildland. As you know, CCWC has never sought an end to hunting or fishing, and off-road riders have not managed to keep their vehicles on the legal trails. CCWC's staff and volunteers spent three summers working hard to reduce the physical and ecological damage these trails cause, but far more will have to be done.

The Crowsnest Conservation Society is presently hiring a full-time Program Manager to assist the organization in achieving its goals of conserving wildlife and wild lands in the Crowsnest Pass area of Alberta, while enhancing the community as a prosperous place to live, work and play. This person will participate fully in the emerging coalition of conservation organizations working in the Crown of the Continent region. The most pressing immediate objective is to ensure wildlife permeability through the urbanizing Highway Three corridor.

If you have not yet written Mr. Klein, Mr. Coumts, and Mr. Mar to request the establishment of the Andy Russell-I'tai Sah Kop Wildland-Provincial Park, please do so, and if you have written, consider replying to the letters you received in reply. Addresses and full background information are available at www.ccwc.ab.ca. •



Impacts on the Castle Wilderness

by James Tweedie, Conservation Director

Oil and Gas exploration: In 2005 Shell Canada proceeded with new exploration wells in the Carbondale aimed at opening up new gas reserves in the north end of their Waterton Field. Owing to a late start and poor drilling, Shell found itself in breach of the operating conditions that apply to these wells that are located in the critical winter range for elk and mule deer. The company has been granted an exemption from those conditions by the Fish and Wildlife Division of Alberta Sustainable Resources Development, and has sweetened the deal by offering to carry out elk monitoring studies in the area—studies that ASRD has never funded. An additional six wells are anticipated in the next two years, targeting reserves underlying the Mt. Backus/Screwdriver Creek area of the Castle Special Management Area, a few kilometres to the north and west of Beaver Mines. In their public notice of these future wells, Shell has suggested that it will automatically seek an extension of its drilling program into the winter months, despite the Critical Wildlife guidelines that seek to minimize the impacts of industrial activities on key wildlife species.



Rig on Spionkop Creek.

Logging: The C5 Forest Management Plan is in its Draft stages. This is a 20-year timber allocation plan, due to come into effect by the first of May 2006, aimed at providing a sustainable timber supply to the Spray Lakes Sawmill in Cochrane, Alberta, which is now the only major timber company in SW Alberta. While embracing the rhetoric of sustainability, the Plan does not even attempt to achieve Canadian Forest Stewardship Certification standards. The accelerated cut regime, a result of the perceived threats of insect infestation and potential fire hazards, calls for a 25 per cent increase in the Annual Allowable Cut Quota, the targeting of the few remaining mature stands of old growth forest (currently at only six per cent of the forested landbase), and a raise in the maximum size of cutblocks going from 80 hectares to 500. There is considerable discomfort about this Plan from within ASRD as well as from other departments, such as Alberta Environment and Alberta Community Development (responsible for Parks and Protected Areas). The CCWC was instrumental in getting the Public Consultation period extended into January, allowing a number of other

local landowners and groups whose lease lands will be affected or are adjacent to the public land affected by the Plan to raise their own concerns. This Plan has the potential to pre-empt all other opportunities and values in the Castle.

Recreational Licenses of Occupation (LOC): As part of its overall development plan, the Castle Mountain Resort ski hill and residential townsite obtained an extensive LOC for the Gravenstafel-Haig Ridge complex in the heart of the Westcastle Valley, and is still looking to extend this LOC in the future to acquire controlled access for further development of cat-skiing and touring.

The LOC at the confluence of the Westcastle and Southcastle rivers that was previously held by the Alberta Attorney General's Department for a Minimum Security facility, has recently been offered for bids. An application is currently in process for a year-round commercial Off-Road Vehicle staging area and campsite to be developed on that site. At least two other possible candidates for the site, the Lethbridge YMCA for an outdoor education and recreation Centre, and the Castle River Stock Association, for corrals and range-riders staging area, have been shelved while the OHV application works itself through the process. This piecemeal approach to issuing development permits in the Castle seriously jeopardizes future wildland values for the area. A better option would be to set aside this location as the Park Entrance and Interpretive Centre for the Andy Russell - I'tai sah kop Park.



Eroding trail on Lynx Creek.

James Tweedie

Access Management Plan Review: This Plan is long overdue for review. A tentative consultation process was initiated in 2005 and the CCWC provided input to the coordinator at that time. The process is currently on-hold until a similar review being carried out by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development for the Ghost-Waiparous Area has been completed.

From all of the above, it is abundantly clear that the designation of a combined Wildland and Provincial Park management scenario for the Castle, such as is contemplated by the Andy Russell - I'tai sah kop Park, is long-overdue. •

Thanks to our generous supporters:

- our volunteers, members and donors
- Wilburforce Foundation
- LaSalle Adams
- World Wildlife
- Conservation Science Solutions Fund
- Fanwood Foundation, and the
- Lethbridge Community Foundation



Thanks to Mr. Coutts for canceling the grizzly hunt and making much information publicly available.



Rare Plant Survey Completed

by Mari Decker

For the last three summers, Reg Ernst has been searching the Castle Wilderness for rare plants, looking to expand our knowledge of the abundance and distribution of rare species that occur in this beautiful diverse wilderness. When Reg began his study, funded by the Alberta Wilderness Association, there were already many records of rare plants for the Castle area. These records are kept with the Alberta Natural Heritage Information Centre (ANHIC) which is the storehouse for rare species info in the province; they maintain a Tracking List of the most rare species, and a Watch List of the marginally rare species. ANHIC provided records of 92 tracked rare species that occurred in 136 locations in the Castle at the beginning of the study!

The new survey focused on areas that had received little attention in the past including the Front Range Canyons in 2003, the South and West Castle River Drainages in 2004, and the Carbondale area in 2005. Overall, Reg located 43 tracked rare species, 12 watched rare species, and a total of 126 populations, or element occurrences (a separation distance of 1 km is used as the standard). Of these, 12 were species that had not been recorded before in the Castle, and most of them were populations that had not been previously recorded!

The known populations at several sites were re-confirmed, and the populations at a few sites were not found again. Some plants were found on alpine scree (e.g., Jones' columbine, large-flowered lungwort, dwarf alpine poppy, alpine townsendia), some in moist lowland meadows (e.g., small-flowered rockstar, early buttercup, alpine foxtail), some in the riparian areas (e.g., American winter cress, stream saxifrage, monkeyflower), some under forest cover (e.g., western twayblade, nodding arnica). Some plants were found in a number of locations in all three years (e.g., woollen-breeches), others found only once (e.g., dwarf bitter-root, prairie lungwort). Below is the impressive list of species found during the survey, we'd love to provide photos of all of them (what a montage that would be!), but instead we hope you have field guides where you can look them up).

Because the Castle is such a vast and diverse area, there are still many nooks and crannies that have not been surveyed, so this study should be viewed as a contribution to existing knowledge rather than a finished work. As well, there are groups of species that have not been investigated including sedges and non-vascular plants (mosses and lichens).

A secondary key finding that emerged from the study is the abundance of noxious, invasive weed species present in the Castle. Six noxious weed species (Canada thistle, toadflax, ox-eye daisy, tall buttercup, hound's-tongue, blueweed), three nuisance species (downy brome, stinkweed, flixweed), and two non-listed species (common mullein and goat's-beard)

were recorded in a number of locations, many of which were dense infestations (sometimes > 1 ha). Non-native species including smooth brome, timothy, Kentucky bluegrass, clover, and black medick are also abundant at low elevations. Many disturbances (cattle, industrial activity and recreational activity) are negatively impacting rare plant habitat directly in the Castle and/or introducing weed species that spread and transform rare plant habitat. These affected areas and the cycles of activity that cause them need to be managed effectively now in order for the abundance and diversity of rare plants to be preserved and protected for the long-term in the Castle. You can read the final report on the AWA website (www.albertawilderness.ca), or call the AWA at 403-283-2025 to get a copy. •



Murray Anderson



Chris Wutzke

Top: Bitterroot growing by charred log. Left: Blue Camas. Right: Yellow Monkey Flower.

White bark pine project

Reg would welcome volunteers to help him locate the dwindling white bark pine stands in the Castle. These would be relatively high elevation field days during Reg's working week. Anyone interested in helping Reg should contact him directly at 403-281-0528. •