



COWS & FISH

CARING FOR THE GREEN ZONE

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Cows & Fish

Field Season Highlights



The Milk River
Photo: Maddison Skinner

THE ART OF NOTICING

Article written and compiled by Kelsey Spicer-Rowe, Maddison Skinner, Alexander Cressman, Anne-Marie Lefebvre, & Dani Castro

Our Riparian Resource Analysts are trained to notice. Their summers are spent noticing the differences, nuances, and subtleties of each riparian site they visit – and they visit a lot! Over 150 sites were visited this summer to collect data on range or riparian health across Alberta. The ability to notice is forged in toddlerhood (in my opinion) – and is built upon as we age.

I'm happy our staff don't come home with pockets full of precious pebbles, bits of fluff and debris in their backpack compartments, like my son, who has 11 years of experience noticing the natural world and its wonders. For toddlers and children, their world is smaller, and on a different level than adults – so it makes sense that they notice more, see more, collect more (both mentally and physically). I hope my son carries this noticing ability forward into life and continues to appreciate the nuances of the landscape and the world around him, like our staff do. So, what did our affectionately called “field crew” notice this summer? Not only did they notice greater than 785 different plant species, but they also kept their eyes on the land and the sky to notice

many other exceptional things in the vast riparian landscapes they travelled.

One of Maddy's highlights this year was her time on the prairies of Alberta's southeastern corner. With the Sweet Grass Hills, *kátóyissiksi*, ever-present on the horizon, she fondly recalls traipsing up and down coulees along the Milk River. The two weeks she spent conducting riparian health inventories in the area were rich with wildlife sightings: she flushed plenty of sharp-tailed grouse from amongst the willows and cottonwoods, traded howls back and forth with a coyote while jotting down riparian health data, and was especially appreciative she got to spy a cow elk wandering the sandy riverbed of the Milk.

A highlight for Anne-Marie this season was travelling through native rangelands of southern Alberta and witnessing the sometimes-inconspicuous magic it has to offer. Gazing at abundant blooms of lupine and native cacti while she watched pronghorns sprint across the golden rolling hills covered with tall native grasses made a hot field day easier to endure. Observing a family of prairie falcons hunting and feeding on a cliff face of the coulees affirms for Anne-Marie, why protecting natural grasslands across the globe is a priority.

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Cows & Fish

Field Season Highlights continued...

For Alex, a Riparian Analyst in his second year with Cows and Fish, the stars shining through the green curtains of the northern lights on a cold, cloudless September night on the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake were a highlight. Working with partners and communities across Alberta means a lot of travel and nights spent sleeping rough for the Cows and Fish 'field crew,' but for Alex, the ability to see the natural beauty and spirit of Alberta and the people that live here, make every cold night magical.

Dani recalls working in the Cypress Hills, which rise dramatically from the surrounding plains, forming a unique, elevated landscape. These hills are characterized by rolling grasslands, dense forests, and striking cliffs. This distinct geography creates a haven for diverse wildlife and a beautiful contrast to the flat prairie below, making the Cypress Hills a captivating natural wonder. While assessing riparian health in the Cypress Hills, Dani and their field partner observed 13 northern leopard frogs! These spotted and bright green frogs are listed as Threatened in Alberta due to their significant population decline. This rare species sighting was incredibly rewarding and exciting for Dani, supporting the idea of the Cypress Hills as a critical biodiverse oasis.

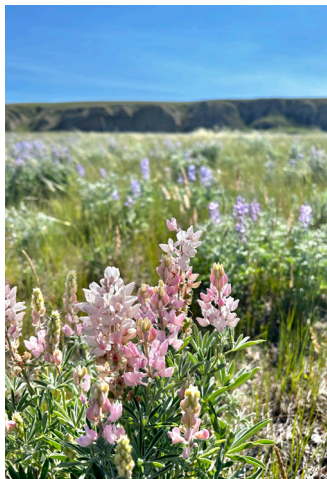


The Northern Lights
Photo: Alex Cressman

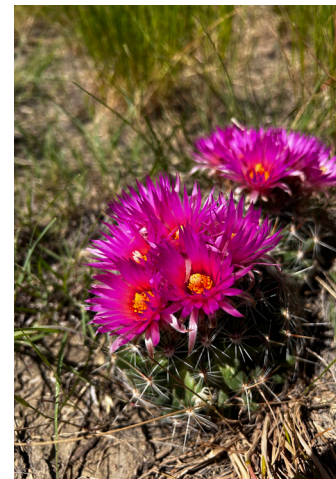
As we move to our offices and desks for winter and shift our noticing from a landscape scale to a more local and indoor way – we hope you too, continue to notice the natural world around you. You may have noticed the Super Moon, named the [Beaver Moon](#), on November 15. The Beaver Moon signals the beaver has laid their stores for winter and are taking shelter to endure the months ahead. Like the beaver, our cache (of riparian health data) is full, and it will keep us fed with sufficient number crunching and interpretation for the long winter months ahead. We will shift our purpose from collecting to utilizing our stores of riparian health data to tell the story of all we noticed in the summer months. If you are lucky enough to receive a riparian health report, we hope you take the time to read it and take note of what our staff noticed for you on your land in 2024.



Northern Leopard Frog
Photo: Dani Castro



Abundant blooms of native lupines add color to the landscape in the County of Warner, AB
Photo: Anne-Marie Lefebvre



A Pincushion cactus displays its bright pink flower near Manyberries, AB
Photo: Anne-Marie Lefebvre

WHAT DID THE COW SAY TO THE FISH ABOUT WILLOWS?

Written by Norine Ambrose, Executive Director

I'm udderly hooked! Read on to find out why!

You probably know that cows eat grass, and that fish live in water, but did you know that they both rely a lot on woody plants like willows?

For cattle, willows in riparian areas provide shade in the heat and wind protection during storms, which might be obvious, yet what many people do not realize is how much cows like to eat willows, especially in the fall and winter, when grass is hard to come by, or has lost a lot of nutritional value, which is common in tame, soft grasses. Even the naked branches of willows, after their leaves have fallen to the ground, are very nutritious, which is why livestock and wildlife both seek them out.

Fish need willows too. Like cows, they get shade from them, keeping the water cooler and giving some overhead protection from those flying above, seeking a fish-y meal. Willows, poplars and red-osier dogwood roots provide the natural rebar that holds streambanks together, reducing erosion and bank slumping, trapping sediment and pollutants, all of which creates better water quality, which fish appreciate. In addition to holding the banks together, roots, branches and even fallen shrubs and trees create a complex and messy web of hiding spots, overhanging banks, and different speeds to the stream – creating the cold, clean, complex, and connected habitat native trout need.



Browse on the "ice-cream plant" of pastures – red-osier dogwood. Browse is that nibbling that livestock and ungulates like deer, elk and moose do on woody plants. Livestock and wildlife all seem to like this shrub and seek it out. Hedged or flat-topped woody plants often indicate that a site needs some additional rest, a change in livestock distribution, or perhaps a change in timing of use.

Management Tip

Keep an eye on the level of browse on willows and other delectable woody plants when livestock are in these areas in order to maintain the health and vigour of these valuable deep-rooted species.

This will benefit both fish and cows, leading to healthier riparian areas that will sustain them both into the future. [Learn more](#) about riparian grazing strategies on pg. 21-40 of the "Riparian Areas and Grazing Management" edition of Caring for the Green Zone.

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What's the difference between grazing and browsing?

Grazing is sometimes used to refer generally to livestock (or wildlife) eating plants, but it can be more specific to mean they are eating grasses and other broad-leaved and non-woody plants. In contrast, browse means livestock or ungulates (elk, deer, moose, etc) are eating parts of woody plants: trees and shrubs.



When cattle are in a small holding area for a longer time, particularly in fall and winter, ensure winter feed and shelter are provided as far away from the stream as possible. This site has stayed well vegetated and maintained some willows because feeding is done away from the stream. A recently added off-stream waterer will hopefully lead the cows to spend even less time lingering at the stream, and enable the willows to regrow more.



Mushroom or umbrella-shaped willows often indicate a lot of browse or rubbing from livestock.



Even without leaves, willows and other woody plants provide forage and habitat, both above and below ground.

STORIES FROM THE RIVER

A storymap project by the [Alberta Native Trout Collaborative](#)

Check out this video about ranching and native trout

[CLICK HERE](#)

Learn more about what native trout need to thrive

[CLICK HERE](#)

Cows & Fish

Women's Grazing Schools

FELLOWSHIP, FORAGE, AND FUN

THE SUCCESS OF WOMEN'S GRAZING SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

By Norine Ambrose,
Executive Director

What exactly is a grazing school for women you ask? My significant other jokingly asked if it is to show women how they could consume their breakfast, lunch, and dinner, perhaps eating cucumber and wheatgrass in stages. Joking aside, it is about providing insights into managing livestock grazing by sharing ideas among like-minded women in agriculture, with support from range science and conservation specialists.

This year was the 22nd year we have worked with partners to put on grazing schools for women. In 2003 the Original Grazing School for Women was spawned by the recognition that there were mostly men attending agricultural educational events, and that something different was needed to reach women. The next year, the Southern Alberta Grazing School for Women was born, covering the southern prairies and foothills, while the original school covered the transition between the boreal forest and rolling parkland, from Provost to Wainwright to Two Hills, Alberta. The amazingly positive feedback and resounding success of both those schools soon led to the creation of more women-focussed annual events, including [Ladies Livestock Lessons](#), which is happening on January 17, 2025 in Acme, Alberta.

While each event has its own group of keen committee members, usually made up of county staff, conservation and stewardship organizations (like ourselves), forage and research associations, and sometimes provincial government range management staff, the key to success is offering something that is built a little differently, to attract women to attend. In the early days of the southern school, scrapbooking, willow-wreath weaving, and other crafty activities were held in the evening to offer something that made the events fun, and more retreat-like.



Practical hands on learning includes setting up electric fencing at the [Original Grazing School for Women](#)



Ranching women learn to assess the health of a riparian area along a prairie stream

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Women's Grazing Schools continued ...

A few key elements have played an important role in the success of the various schools over two decades:

- **Focusing on in-field hands-on learning and skills, to complement indoor presentations (think: who wants to preg-check a life-sized cow model, or get down on their knees and figure out how much carryover is left in the pasture?)**
- **Ensuring that women in primary agriculture are on the agenda, sharing what they have learned, not just non-ag presenters**
- **Keeping the event local by moving around and reaching new areas**
- **Small scale and inexpensive - with 2 days of food and resources included, the schools are still less than \$150!**
- **Offering agricultural and grazing related topics like weed management and electric fencing**
- **Including topics that are not directly agronomy or grazing focussed, but are still very relevant to agricultural producers, like succession planning, mental health, xeriscaping gardening, or wildlife ecology**
- **Creating a culture of openness and shared learning, which recognises those organizing the schools and those attending both have a lot of knowledge and experience to share with each other**

One of the most rewarding parts about these schools is the high return rate—most years, between a quarter and a third of attendees are alumni – usually bringing friends and family that are excited to see why it is such a must-attend event. The schools have become a strong social network too—with friendships spawned from women who otherwise may never have met, and sometimes this is their annual must-have visit.

The value of the schools to primary producers and the lands they manage is clear: exit evaluations show that virtually all the producers learned new information and are planning to apply these new ideas and management when they get home. Of course, planning is not always a guarantee for implementation; however, when we ask women

The key to success is offering something that is built a little differently, to attract women to attend.

who have attended before if they did implement changes, almost all of them made changes as a direct result of the schools!

A number of years ago we evaluated the impact of the schools; working with a social scientist who reached out to those that had previously attended. The evaluation showed an additional bonus we had not anticipated: all of the producers had shared what they had learned with family and friends, and almost all of those connections were also planning or had made changes to their management!

If you are not convinced yet, the success of maintaining these long-term annual events speak for itself, as do new schools or contacts. In recent years, we have provided support and discussed the 'secret sauce' with agricultural extension staff in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, along with hosted attendees from 'Down Under' who hope to take the idea home with them now that they've seen it in person. In 2024, the newest school

started in the Peace Region, called the AgricultHer school (catchy play on words we think). Want to stay connected or attend a women's grazing event? [Subscribing to this newsletter](#) and following Cows and Fish and all the partner organizations on social media

is a fantastic way. You can also keep up with the women's grazing schools by following the [Grazing Schools for Women Facebook page](#) and the [Original Grazing School for Women's Facebook page](#).

This article was written with support from the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.



Plant identification, a regular part of Southern Alberta Grazing School for Women, is one of the highest rated annual topics because of its usefulness at home managing pasture lands.

Cows & Fish

Riparian Fun Fact

HORSETAIL

By Kristina Boehler,
Riparian Specialist

When was the last time you read the shampoo ingredients while taking a shower?

Next time you do, keep an eye out for extracts from a common riparian species. Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) is sometimes used in shampoo since it contains high levels of silica which are thought to increase the strength and thickness of hair reducing breakage.




Young horsetail, not yet fully grown




Horsetail fertile, (reproductive) stems

Common Horsetail

Equisetum arvense



fertile stems



sterile stems

Forage Value		
G	F	P
Bank/Shoreline Protection		
E	G	F
Plant Status		
Native		

Identification Tips

- perennial with many upright hollow stems

There are two kinds of stems:

fertile stems

- begin to appear in spring
- succulent, thick stems with no branches; brownish to pinkish-white; 10-30 cm tall, spore cone at the tip

sterile stems

- appear after the fertile stems begin to wither
- many branches on a jointed stem, occurring in whorls, 10-50 cm tall

Similar Species

Very similar to meadow horsetail (*Equisetum pratense*), but both the fertile and sterile stems are green, unlike the brownish-pink coloured fertile stems of *E. arvense*.

Riparian Remark

Horsetail has been used by humans for medicinal purposes for centuries. It has been used as a diuretic, for soothing gums while teething, for skin disorders and many other ailments. It's also great for scrubbing pots when camping!

Common Horsetail

BROAD-LEAF PLANTS

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[Learn more](#) about riparian plants by ordering your own FREE copy of "A field guide to Common Riparian Plants of Alberta"

Cows & Fish

Events & Special Features

LADIES LIVESTOCK LESSONS

A workshop designed for women involved in or interested in the profession of managing livestock.

Ladies Livestock Lessons was developed with the goals of encouraging and educating women in the business and to facilitate the opportunity to expand their professional network.

SESSION TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Pasture Pollinators
- Neonatal Management & Scours
- Electric Fencing Demo
- Madigan Squeeze Demo
- Solar Livestock Water Systems Demo
- Mental Health in Agriculture

DATE

17 January 2025

LOCATION

Acme Community Centre,
Acme Alberta

REGISTER NOW

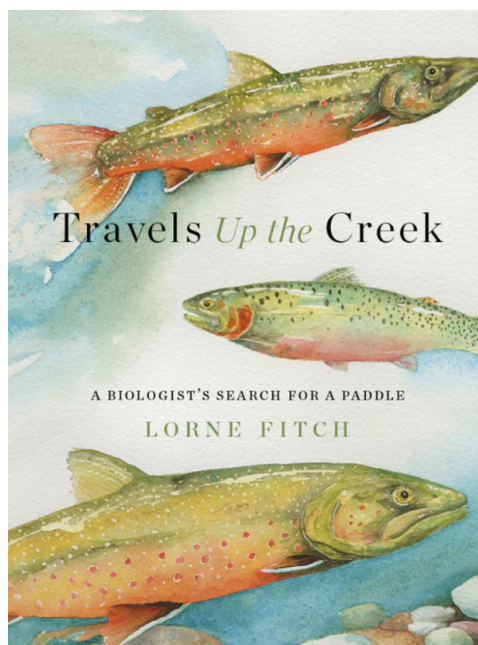
[Click Here](#)

COWS AND FISH SWAG

Even though this looks like an album cover ►►

Our staff are actually just looking very cool in their new branded swag! Pretty soon you too will have the chance to get your hands on stickers, patches, caps & more!

BOOK RELEASE



Our co-founder, Lorne Fitch has a new book! This engaging journey confronts ecological challenges, advocating a shift in perspective and encouraging readers to embrace curiosity and scrutiny in contemplating the significance of our natural landscape.

LEARN MORE

[Rocky Mountain Books](#)



RANCHING OPPORTUNITIES

A conference developed with the goal of promoting environmentally and economically sustainable livestock production.

Save the date! Tickets are going on sale soon for the Ranching Opportunities Conference. This event covers a wide range of topics related to on-farm best practices for natural resource and livestock management and economic development. Each year the organizing team ensures the topics are interesting and relevant to the current industry climate.

DATE

5 February 2025

LOCATION

Pomeroy Inn & Suites,
Olds College

LEARN MORE

[Red Bow Agricultural Partnership](#)

RECONNECTING LAND & WATER WEBINAR

Low-Tech, Process-Based Restoration

Missed our latest webinar about how Low-Tech Process-Based Restoration can be used to restore streams? Not to worry, you can still check it out on YouTube.

WATCH NOW

[YouTube](#)

Cows & Fish

Connecting land & water

HAVE YOU WORKED WITH COWS AND FISH IN THE PAST?

- Have you wondered how your riparian area scores now?
- Wanted to have an extension event in your local community?
- Have a riparian management story to share?

To increase the broader community's riparian awareness and expertise, we will deliver extension events with local partners, bringing together neighbours and sharing successes. If you are a landowner we worked with in the past, and want to reconnect with us, give us a call or email. Visit our [contact us](#) page for more information

WE LOVE HEARING FROM YOU!

Please contact Norine Ambrose: nambrose@cowsandfish.org or any Riparian Specialist, to follow up on any items in this newsletter. For full contact information, visit our [contact us](#) page.

COWS AND FISH

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Riparian areas, the areas connecting land and water, help clean our water, create drought and flood resiliency, and provide habitat for fish and wildlife.

Cows and Fish's mission is to promote healthy landscapes by fostering riparian stewardship.

MEET OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Cows and Fish Board of Directors and Members include local producer and community representatives.

Cows and Fish members provide the input, support, and guidance needed to achieve Cows and Fish's mission. We also rely on financial and in-kind support from Donors and Funding Sources to accomplish our goals. Visit our [support page](#) to make a donation.

CONNECT WITH US

Find a riparian specialist in your area or send us a general inquiry

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