



**COWS
& FISH**

CARING FOR THE GREEN ZONE

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SEEDS OF KNOWLEDGE

Written by Logan Peters, Communications Coordinator

The Alberta Native Plant Rescue Foundation is working to preserve the grasslands, and so can you!

Even though Alberta's native grass and plant species are integral to maintaining healthy ecosystems, many are endangered or at-risk due to a lack of protections from development and other land uses.

In 2022, Mathis Natvik, one of the founders of The Alberta Native Plant Rescue Foundation (ABNPR), noticed that a large natural area was slated for removal to make room for the new Highway 1A/22 interchange in Cochrane, Alberta. Stopping the project was not an option, so Natvik got to work strategizing how he could rescue the native plants that would soon be destroyed or suffocated by asphalt concrete.

After receiving approval from the Government Ministries and stakeholders charged with managing the project, they completed their first plant rescue.

"When construction finally began, it was clear from the growing turnout that enthusiasm for rescuing native plants was spreading. I began looking for new sites —

Emma Stroud, Ecology Manager at Friends of Fish Creek Park giving a tour of a grassland restoration site in 2023 (photo by Logan Peters)

especially upcoming urban developments on remnant grasslands," said Blake McNeill, one of three founders of The Alberta Native Plant Rescue Foundation.

The plant rescue partners with developers such as Qualico Communities and Calbridge Developments, as well as Genesis Land, who even packaged the native seeds collected by the team and gave them to new homeowners living in Logan Landing.

The ABNPR, which was founded by Mathis Natvik, Helene Darnet, and Blake McNeill, held about 60 plant rescues in 2025 alone. With the help of volunteers and community members, they saved over 200,000 native

plants and countless seeds from over 100 different species of native plants this year.

Emma Stroud, the Ecology Manager with Friends of Fish Creek Park recently presented about the plant rescue's

initiatives at the [World Conference on Ecological Restoration](#) in Denver, Colorado. She says the plant rescue gives the park access to roughly ten times more native plant species than they would have if they purchased the plants and seeds from a supplier. ►

THEY SAVED OVER 200,000 NATIVE PLANTS AND COUNTLESS SEEDS FROM OVER 100 DIFFERENT SPECIES OF NATIVE PLANTS THIS YEAR.

The park used to spend roughly \$100,000 every few years on native plants for their restoration projects, but after attending the plant rescues, their team managed to rescue an in-kind value of about \$200,000 worth of native plants.

Of the roughly 45,000 native plants Fish Creek Park saved last year, 80% of them were planted in restoration sites, 10% went into their nursery, and the other 10% were made into an external seed bank which were given away to volunteers and community members to plant in their own gardens. Due to the sheer amount of native plants that need to be rehomed, Stroud is urging anyone who has space in their yards to take native plants home and plant them.

The Friends of Fish Creek Park have been working to return sections of the park to their natural state as a native Foothills fescue grassland. The project began in 2015 when ATCO replaced a high-pressure gas line through the area. When the 0.5 hectare pad site was no longer required, they funded the re-vegetation of the site and designated it the "ATCO Heritage Grassland."



The same site featured above, now in 2025, with even more diversity of native grasses and wildflowers thanks to the plant rescue (photo by Emma Stroud)



A haul from just one plant rescue. The Friends of Fish Creek Park rescue about 1000 plants per salvage (photo by Emma Stroud)

The site was originally seeded with six types of native grasses, but after the plant rescues, Stroud was able to plant 105 species of native grasses and wildflowers at the site. [Click here](#) to read our 2023 newsletter article about the project.

The genetic diversity of native plants found at rescue sites makes them hardier and more resilient to disease than plants grown from a small pool of parent plants, like those grown in nurseries.

"I think of genetics as a pool of knowledge, and our native species contain the knowledge for survival in a given location," Cows and Fish's Provincial Riparian Specialist Amy Berlando said.

"Native plants have adapted to local climate and their timing for reproductive cycles is important for survival of certain "fauna" species such as pollinators, who need certain early flowering plants like willow and prairie crocus, or for food supplies for migrating birds. The local animals know what's in season."

It can be difficult for organizations and individuals to find trusted native seed sources in Canada without infrastructure like that of [The National Seed Strategy](#) in the United States. Even though organizations like the ►

[Southern Alberta Native Seed Collaborative](#) have been working on a strategy to improve the access and availability of native seed, Stroud says we need to start growing native seed “yesterday.”

“We need to start giving seeds to our community. Put them in community gardens, people’s backyards, schools. Everyone needs to become a native plant grower because the situation is so dire. We just need to start. We just need to do it,” Stroud said.

In his book [Streams of Consequence](#), our co-founder Lorne Fitch recounted the day he no longer needed to mow his lawn; when he replaced “exotic” Kentucky bluegrass with grasses that are native to Alberta.

“No one’s asked, but if they do, I’ll remind them that in the natural world, prairie grasslands were managed by either fire or grazing... We can either torch the lawn periodically or get a buffalo in to graze it down.”

Our Provincial Riparian Specialist Amy Berlando frequents the plant rescues for her garden,

“I probably picked up 20 different species at only two different events. And the fun is, if you go throughout the growing season, you get different things in flower.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

Stroud is optimistic that the plant rescues will spread like wildfire. She hopes to invest more time into educating Albertans about how to ID, salvage, plant, and care for native plants so they feel empowered to implement their own re-wilding projects.

“Even though development is inevitable, the plant rescues at least give you something to do that carries on those plant genetics,” Stroud said.



Plains rough fescue (*Festuca hallii*), is a hearty grass native to Alberta (photo by Logan Peters)

If you are interested in rescuing native plants with The Alberta Native Plant Rescue Foundation, please email notifications@abnpr.org. Willow rescues will begin in early Spring 2026 and plant rescues will resume as soon as the crocuses start to bloom. You can also follow them on Instagram at [@albertanativeplantrescue](https://www.instagram.com/albertanativeplantrescue).



Sheep farmer Tara Klager with her sheep
(photo by Maddy Skinner)

“THERE’S A REASON SHEPHERDING IS A VERB”:

Tara Klager is a sheep farmer and fierce steward of the grasslands. She runs Providence Lane Homestead in the Water Valley area northwest of Calgary, where she raises heritage sheep on her small-scale fibre farm. In late October, our Riparian Specialist Maddy Skinner sat down with Tara on the farm to chat water, grasslands, riparian stewardship, and all about the joys, trials, and tribulations of sheep farming.

Interview by Maddy Skinner, Riparian Specialist

Hello Tara! What made you want to be a farmer in the first place? Because you're first generation, right?

I'm first generation, but in the sense that it skipped a generation. My grandparents were farmers. My grandfather actually ran the feed co-op in my hometown, and farmed Herefords, so beef cows, but comes from a dairy background in Ontario. So I grew up around beef cows, goats, and dairy cows – which is why I don't have beef cows, goats, or dairy cows! But I think there was always a desire to do something like this, to get back to something like what I'd had as a child.

My grandmother's from Grimshaw up north in Alberta and she'd always talked about the prairie skies and these giant expanses of space. So when I finally got here, I fell in love with that. I like the prairies, I love the wide open-spaces.

When we bought the place in 2015, finding some way to safeguard and honor that landscape became super important to me. And I knew I needed [the equivalent of] a little buffalo.

I needed a little bison. And I didn't want cows, and I didn't want goats. I don't knit, I don't crochet, but somehow I ended up with sheep.

Cows & Fish

What are some quirks of raising sheep that might surprise, say, a cattle rancher?

I think a lot of cow people think sheep are small cows, but it's a totally different beastie. People will turn out cows in the spring, kick them out onto pasture and not see them again until November.

You can't do that with sheep. There's a reason shepherding is a verb. You know, you have to be part of your sheep. You have to be amongst your sheep – I mean, you don't have to, but then you're going to lose sheep.

Right.

So I think that shepherding and taking care of sheep is a much more hands-on, day to day kind of thing than it is with cows – certainly more than it was with my experience of cows.

What's your water situation like?

We have a dugout. It predates us - we came and it was already there. It's seasonal, it comes and goes. And then over in the northwest corner of the property we have a natural wetland which is heavily visited by moose. When you go in there you can see that they've been very good about pruning all the willows. Cows and Fish assessed that one, actually, very early on.

And then in the back northeast corner of the property, there's another wetland back there. Again, also seasonal. But that one actually sees a lot of wild ungulate and bear activity. We don't actively graze there until generally the end of September, once it's past the seed shatter stage, because that's our fescue area. But I can't imagine anything without water.

And how do you express that in your stewardship?

I can't do anything without water. This past year wasn't too bad, although the rains came late. It's not just how much rain you get, it's when it comes. These all have implications for how you can graze or how you can move your animals. [...] I see the sheep as sort of a way of managing and farming water, more than using the water to take care of the sheep.

And after you're on the land for a while, you develop this... it's like an instinct. It's like an intuition that this or that thing needs more time, or it's not the right time. So I'm always trying to balance the data side of things, which is super important, with the land literacy.

I'm not always right. Sometimes I get it wrong, but year over year, I'm improving. And I know I'm improving because I see, and this is the bigger metric for me, the biodiversity year over year is improving.

[...] Our sort of motto for the farm is 'from the ground up'. Because if I don't take care of that level, that ground foundation level, I don't have a farm. And I think that's true for most of us who are involved in land stewardship. We just take different routes to get there.

You can keep up with Tara and the sheep at Providence Lane's [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts, or by subscribing to the [farm newsletter](#). This interview was made possible through funding from the Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Program (WRRP).



Providence Lane Farms' motto is "from the ground up" (photo by Maddy Skinner)

SNAKES ON A (FLOOD)PLAIN

Compiled and written by: Kelsey Spicer-Rawe with submissions from Alex Cressman, Bryson Ritchie, and Dani Castro

Reptiles, specifically snakes, were top of mind in our field data collection planning and execution this summer.

Alberta is home to six species of snakes (bullsnake, plains garter snake, prairie rattlesnake, red-sided garter snake, wandering garter snake, and western hog-nosed snake) and although not unusual for our staff to encounter them during our field work, a few of the regions we were working in this summer increased the odds of seeing some specific species.

Did you catch my movie reference in the title of this article? I'm among the many (or maybe the few – it didn't get rave reviews, but it did get a lot of hype) who didn't watch that movie – you know, the 2006 action thriller with venomous snakes released on a plane as part of an attempt to kill a murder witness starring Samuel L. Jackson. It wasn't that I didn't care for the actor (Avengers, Pulp Fiction, Jurassic Park – what's not to love?), it was the plot that struck me as something I didn't want to ever consider nor encounter. I'd much rather run into snakes in the vast prairie, or in our case, more often, a floodplain. These encounters leave both snake and human in a happier state knowing you've come across a sensational sighting in its natural habitat.

So, which slithery species did we encounter this summer that required us to lace up our snake gaiters and watch where we stepped? If snakes aren't your jam, it's probably a good idea to stop reading now.

Alex, Bryson, and I spent a week in Dinosaur Provincial Park in June. As the name suggests, it's home to a rich fossil history, but also home to the prairie rattlesnake listed as 'Sensitive' in Alberta. It was Alex's first visit to this Park, and if you've been before, you know the feeling as you enter the badlands of the Red Deer River valley as you drive into the Park. It is one of both awe and wonder. Alex describes it as rounded peaks of barren moonrock that form the hilltops. Cracked boulders have come to rest on eroded slopes, where they anchor cacti and hide rattlesnakes. In the flood plains, old cottonwoods wear crowns of bleached and gnarled dead branches and one species of willow



Eastern yellow-bellied racer (photo by Dani Castro)

(*Salix amygdaloides*, or peachleaf willow) stands as tall as a tree. Dinosaur Provincial Park is special for many reasons, one of which is because it's one of Canada's first UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The exposed badlands present greater access for paleontologists searching for fossils, but also create a unique ecosystem that Alex got to explore for the first time as part of his Riparian Resource Analyst work. In his third year with Cows and Fish, this was an incredible and breathtaking field location and a highlight of his summer field work.

When asked for a field season highlight, Bryson, a new to Cows and Fish Riparian Resource Analyst, also chose Dinosaur Provincial Park riparian health inventory work. Bryson recalls their long but gratifying days spent assessing the unique ecology of Dinosaur Provincial Park. While this park is a truly marvelous place to be at any time, this year's heavier-than-usual rainfall in June brought a flourish of native wildflower blooms, right in time for their work in the Park. The ability to not only experience the Park, but to contribute to setting benchmarks for riparian health in this ecosystem was an absolute privilege for us.

When not distracted by the vibrant colour of the blooms in the badlands, we were lucky enough to

see three prairie rattlesnakes in one location. The behaviour appeared to be a female luring in two male snakes for mating. Neither snake nor human were especially startled by the encounter, and we felt privileged to view their behaviour for a few quiet minutes from a distance.

Fast forward to August and the Cows and Fish field crew traveled to the far southeast corner of Alberta to complete riparian health inventory data collection. Dani, a second-year Riparian Resource Analyst, was part of this crew. On the first day, Dani had an unforgettable encounter — an eastern yellow-bellied racer. Dani describes the encounter as both terrifying and incredible.

The snake was nearly as long as Dani is tall (adult eastern yellow-bellied racers can grow to 1.8 meters). When they encountered it, they had just taken off their snake gaiters to cool down in the summer heat. Dani can confidently say they've never put gaiters back on so quickly! Although not venomous, the sheer size of this snake was startling. These snakes are known to move at racing speed (hence the name) and may bite if they feel cornered.

The eastern yellow-bellied racer is a new snake to Alberta (if you're counting, this makes seven species total!) with an 'Undetermined' status in the province and confirmed sightings restricted to the Dry Mixedgrass natural sub-region of the Grassland natural region. At the northern edge of its global range in southeastern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan, it is listed federally as 'Threatened' under COSEWIC (The Committee on the Status of Endangered Species in Canada).

These two resources provide more information on the snakes of Alberta:

- [Snakes in Alberta brochure \(Government of Alberta\)](#)
- [Reptiles of Alberta booklet \(Alberta Conservation Association\)](#)

As we look fondly back on our summer of field data collection to capture the state of riparian habitats in Alberta, we can reflect on our highs (how high did Dani jump when the snake raced by?) and lows (how low did Bryson have to peer to know the species of each wildflower?). What is clear is that whether it is the evening light in the badlands, the blooms on a less commonly seen wildflower, or the surprise slither of a snake that sets our hearts racing in the field, our staff put their hearts into this work, and we are grateful for it.



Prickly Pear Cactus flowering, Dinosaur Provincial Park
(photo by Kelsey Spicer-Rawe)



Showy Milkweed, Dinosaur Provincial Park
(photo by Kelsey Spicer-Rawe)



RHI data collection by Alex, Dinosaur Provincial Park
(photo by Kelsey Spicer-Rawe)

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Riparian Fun Fact

HOW DO BEAVERS PREPARE FOR WINTER?

Written by Kerri O'Shaughnessy, Riparian Specialist

The beaver is a herbivore, consuming cellulose and digesting it with microbial action. Their food preferences shift throughout the year with a substantial portion of their spring and summer diet coming from non-woody plants like cattails, bulrushes, water lilies, duck weed, grass, forbs, and sedges. Woody plants make up 32% of a beaver's diet in spring, 16% in summer, 60% in fall, and 86% in winter. The shift to more woody species happens in the fall before freeze

up, similarly to how humans stockpile firewood before winter. Over the winter beaver rely on tree and shrub branches they gather in the fall and store as a food cache outside their lodge. The caches are mostly submerged, allowing beaver to access them under ice cover, reducing the risk of predation. Curious about beavers? Check out the [Working with Beavers website](#) for resources about beaver benefits and coexistence tools.



Beaver lodge with food cache of branches in the centre of the pond

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Upcoming Events

LADIES LIVESTOCK LESSONS (LLL)

LLL is a workshop designed for women involved in or interested in the profession of managing livestock. It was developed with the goals of encouraging and educating women in the business and to facilitate the opportunity to expand their professional network.

DATE & TIME

January 16, 2026
8:30am - 4:00pm

LOCATION

Heritage Centre
near Cremona, AB

REGISTER NOW

[Click here to register](#)

2026 RANCHING OPPORTUNITIES CONFERENCE

Low Stress People Handling, Business Planning and Profitability in the Cattle Business, Soil Testing, Producer panel and so much more! Your ticket includes top quality sessions, tradeshow, networking, producer panel, lunch, coffee, and snacks.

DATE & TIME

February 5, 2026
8:30am - 4:00pm

LOCATION

Olds College Alumni Centre

REGISTER NOW

[Click here to register](#)

KAINAI ECOSYSTEM PROTECTION AGENCY (KEPA) SUMMIT

Save the date for the 12th annual KEPA Summit this June! The theme for this year is "Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) Cultural Keystone Species."

DATE

June 3 - 5, 2026

LOCATION

TBD

LEARN MORE

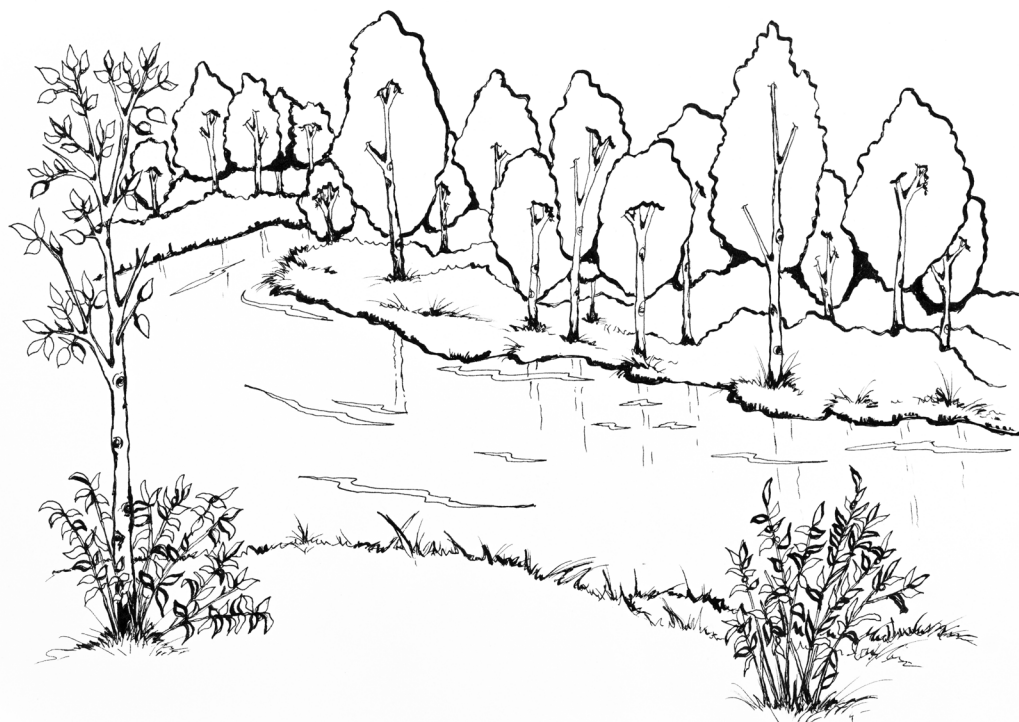
[Visit their website](#)

BONUS COLOURING PAGE

We need your help finishing this drawing of a beautiful riparian area! Don't forget to include your favourite plants and animals (willows, flowers, fish, frogs, dragonflies, etc.!).

Send your completed drawing to communications@cowsandfish.org and we'll post the picture on our Instagram story:

[@riparianmanagementsociety](#)



Cows & Fish

Special Features

CONSERVATION CONFIDENTIAL

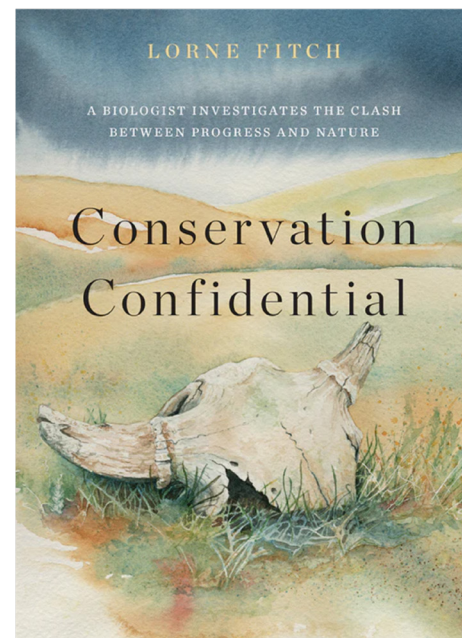
New book by Lorne Fitch

Our co-founder, Lorne Fitch has written a new book. "Conservation Confidential is a compelling exploration of the clash between environmental stewardship and human ambition. Drawing on decades as a biologist, Lorne Fitch reflects on the complex dynamics between science, industry, and development. With wit, sharp critique, and heartfelt storytelling, he contrasts the priorities of industries like forestry, mining, and agriculture with the values of conservationists, asking: just because something can be done, should it?"

Through personal insights and vivid anecdotes, Fitch examines the moral and ecological consequences of unchecked industrial growth while championing the urgent need for balance and foresight. His essays challenge readers to reconsider what progress truly means in a world where ecological boundaries are rapidly being surpassed.

A call to action and a celebration of nature, Conservation Confidential inspires change by raising awareness, nurturing empathy, and encouraging responsibility toward imperilled species and ecosystems—reminding us to treasure and protect the places we call home."

- Rocky Mountain Books



[Click here](#) to learn more and to buy the book

BEING TROUT EDUCATION KIT

New tool by Alberta Native Trout Collaborative

Native trout species have called the Eastern Slopes their home for thousands of years but are now facing increasing declines in population and distribution.

The 'Being Trout' edu-kit is designed to introduce students to the world of Alberta's native trout and inspire collective action. Through interactive games and activities, students will come to understand native trout habitat needs, threats, recovery actions, and much more.

This kit provides free resources for teachers who are looking for ways to incorporate environmental themes into K-12 students' learning plans. Activities are specifically designed to align with Alberta education curriculum.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the kit

ABOUT ALBERTA NATIVE TROUT COLLABORATIVE

[Alberta Native Trout Collaborative](#) is a group of partner organizations working to advance native trout recovery in Alberta via cumulative effects analysis, habitat restoration, restoration stocking, land use planning, watershed and fish population assessments, and public education.

Together, we coordinate resources to mitigate threats and promote recovery of Alberta's Threatened native trout via watershed prioritization and on-the-ground habitat restoration and monitoring. But these efforts are unsustainable if they're not supported and maintained by the general public. For this reason, we also work together to educate, engage and inspire all Albertans to take pride in native trout, and to take action to help care for their habitats.

The Alberta Native Trout Collaborative receives funding through the Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk (CNFASAR) from Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

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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