

## MULTISAR LENDS A HAND TO FISH AND WILDLIFE'S UNDERCOVER UNIT

It was a beautiful sunny fall day and no one suspected that an unmarked vehicle that pulled into a Lethbridge parking lot on October 5th was actually carrying a very unusual cargo seized by the Undercover Unit of Alberta Sustainable Resources Development's Special Investigations and Forensic Services Section. Fish and Wildlife Officers raided an Edmonton home on October 1st, following an undercover investigation, where they discovered 12 live prairie rattlesnakes, 2 adults and 10 young. Two crooks were attempting to sell the snakes when SRD's Fish and Wildlife Officers received a tip about the operation.

With the snakes in the safety of the officers, the Lethbridge Species at Risk Biologist, Brandy Downey, was contacted to arrange a delivery and release back into the wild. Because of the number of snakes involved and the delicate nature of the release, Brandy contacted the trained biologists from MULTISAR to assist with the process.

Prairie rattlesnakes are the only venomous snakes in Alberta and their handling must be conducted with caution and safety for both the snakes and humans. MULTISAR staff have received training on how to safely handle these snakes and this provided a great opportunity for biologists Darryl Jarina and François Blouin to put their skills to work and ensure a successful release.

But where do you release rattlesnakes in October? Brandy Downey had an idea about that. Information indicated that the snakes were allegedly captured "near Milk River"; it only made sense to return them to the Milk River area. Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, which is located on the Milk River, is a well known prairie rattlesnake refuge. Releasing these snakes within the protected park boundaries would maximize their chance of survival. In addition, Brandy was also aware of two snake hibernacula in the park. She contacted Greg Ottway, the Conservation Officer for the park, who was very enthusiastic and supportive of releasing the snakes in Writing-on-Stone Park. Fall is actually when snakes return to their hibernaculum (den) to spend their winter underground in a dormant state. Research on translocated adult rattlesnakes has shown that if a translocated snake successfully overwinters at a new hibernaculum, its odds of adopting its new home are greatly increased. Therefore, October was an opportune time to release these snakes back into the wild.

The snake release proceeded without a glitch. After driving to Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, the snakes that arrived in two larger aquariums were first transferred into 5 gallon plastic pales with lids for ease of transportation to the hibernaculum. The snakes were handled using specialized snake tongs that allow a secure grip on them at a safe distance. Brandy led the group to the known hibernaculum at the base of the sandstone cliffs and the rattling of the current occupants confirmed that the site was still active.

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Greg Ottway

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After carefully removing the lids, the adult snakes gently crawled away from the buckets and started investigating their new home. As for the young, they stayed lumped together on the grass for a while before feeling comfortable to move around and explore their new home.

While our fear of snakes often makes us despise them, they play a very important role in nature in controlling pests. By learning more about the biology and natural history of prairie rattlesnakes and by respecting them, we can better appreciate their presence in the grassland ecosystem and ensure their protection and that of their habitat.

As for the two individuals who attempted to make a profit with some of Mother Nature's little crawlers, they have been charged, among other things, with possession of wildlife for the purpose of trafficking, unlawful possession and unlawful sale of wildlife.

The prairie rattlesnake is considered "May be at Risk" under the 2005 general status of Alberta Wild Species.

## S h o w m e t h e m o n e y !

Shining the spotlight on financial incentives for environmental projects on agricultural land.

In the Spotlight: 3 project grants with upcoming deadlines:

Alberta Conservation Association Grant Eligible Conservation Fund (ACA) - January 31, 2011

Alberta Stewardship Network Watershed Stewardship Grants (ASN) - February 1, 2011

Oldman Watershed Council Watershed Legacy Program (WLP) - February 15, 2011

**Summary:** Fill out the application with project information and wait for a reply. If you are selected, a final report and receipts are required. Application forms aren't too lengthy and are similar for all 3 grants so apply for all of them.

**Good to Know:** If you live in the Oldman basin the WLP is less competitive than the other 2 because it is only available to landowners in the Oldman River basin whereas the other 2 are Alberta wide. The ACA grant is not only for landowners or landowner groups; organizations can also apply but ACA has more total funding available.

**Tips:** Be sure to contact your County Conservation Coordinator for assistance.

Call the Grant Coordinator for the organization to discuss how to strengthen your application.

Make sure your application conveys a sense of urgency and importance.

Apply as a group for multiple projects and make a big impact on your sub basin.

For more information:

ACA - [www.ab-conservation.com/go/default/index.cfm/grants/grant-eligible-conservation-fund/overview/](http://www.ab-conservation.com/go/default/index.cfm/grants/grant-eligible-conservation-fund/overview/)

Email: [amy.mackinven@ab-conservation.com](mailto:amy.mackinven@ab-conservation.com)

Call: Amy at 1-877-722-4323

ASN - [www.ab.stewardshipcanada.ca/index.php/grants](http://www.ab.stewardshipcanada.ca/index.php/grants)

Email: Wallis at [grant@landstewardship.org](mailto:grant@landstewardship.org)

Call: Wallis at 1-877-727-5278

WLP - [www.oldmanbasin.org](http://www.oldmanbasin.org)

Email: Shannon@[oldmanbasin.org](mailto:Shannon@oldmanbasin.org) for the application forms

Call Shannon at 403-381-5801

## RARE TRUMPETER SWAN BREEDING HABITAT BENEFITS FROM WATERING UNIT

Letting a ranch rest for a full year is not always an economically viable option to a rancher in their first year of operation. This was the unique position however of Yarrow Creek Ranch near Twin Butte, Alberta, owned by Charlie Fischer and managed by Tracy Latham. The Ranch would not be a producer itself, but would provide grazing opportunities to local ranchers. But before cattle were turned onto the ranch, Tracy and Charlie wanted to know how grazing cattle would affect sensitive ecosystems and wildlife species. This is when Tracy turned to the MULTISAR program for advice on the local wildlife.

MULTISAR conducted a Species at Risk Conservation (SARC) Plan on the ranch, which consists of a series of ranch-specific management recommendations and tools that can assist in improving wildlife habitats and the sustainability of the cattle operation. These plans derive from an inventory of the important wildlife habitats present on the ranch and an assessment of their quality in supporting the known or potential species in the area. From the site visit, it was determined that the ranch held a key breeding habitat for one of Alberta's stunning migrant birds, the trumpeter swan. Most of Alberta's trumpeter swans typically spend their breeding and brood rearing season in the Grande Prairie area, but a few scattered pairs nest under the towering presence of the Rocky Mountains, in the southwest corner of Alberta. These birds are sensitive to disturbance and therefore rely on shallow lakes and marshes away from the noise and commotion that is often associated with southern Alberta recreation. One such lake on the ranch fits this description, and was known to historically support a pair of swans that bred and raised their young.

Because of the uniqueness of this site and the need for habitat protection of these sensitive birds in southwest Alberta, the Yarrow Creek Ranch decided to implement one of the key recommendations of the SARC Plan and installed a remote watering unit on the breeding lake. It is expected that the watering unit will pull pressure from cattle off of the lake, which will in turn improve the overall "health" of the riparian area, while reducing direct disturbance to this sensitive habitat. The Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society, Cows and Fish, was contracted to conduct a riparian health assessment and MULTISAR's biologists surveyed the lake to see if it was still being used by trumpeter swans. These and the data collected during future monitoring will be used to document changes to riparian health over time, and will help MULTISAR biologists and the Yarrow Creek Ranch better understand the effectiveness of off-site watering in improving wildlife habitat, specifically in this case for the trumpeter swan. Hopefully in the near future, the ranch will see the return of the trumpeter swan on the property. In the mean time, cattle will be provided with a clean and reliable water source.

Being able to provide this service and seeing their SARC Plan recommendations being embraced by the ranching community was in itself a success for the MULTISAR biologists, but things did not stop there. In June, the ranch organized a site tour with local ranchers to discuss how the watering unit was providing benefits to both, wildlife species and ranchers. Twelve local ranchers attended the tour and braved the onslaught of rain, all hoping to learn a bit more about ranch sustainability and the MULTISAR program. MULTISAR endeavored to show that managing for species at risk and other wildlife does not mean sacrifices to a cattle operation. When you manage for the sustainability of one, you are more often than not, positively affecting the other.

Thank you to all who attended that rainy day in June. We hope to continue working with you in caring for the land and its inhabiting wildlife and people.



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# MULTISAR FOCAL SPECIES: PRAIRIE TOADS

## Plains spadefoot *May be at risk (AB), Not at risk (CAN)*

**Description:** Stout bodied with gray, green or brown coloured, relatively smooth skin. Vertical eye pupil distinguishes them from true toads. Black, wedge-shaped bony projections ('spades') on each hind foot are used for digging. Solid raised mass between eyes. 3.7 - 6.2 cm in length. Call sounds like snoring and can be heard 1km away.

**Status:** Population trends are largely unknown due to limited long term monitoring but appear to be stable. Populations are highly irruptive and depend on annual precipitation creating temporary wetlands suitable for breeding.

**Habitat:** Arid regions of North America where soils are sandy. Spadefoots spend most of their time underground, emerging only to forage or breed after heavy rains and warm temperatures. Rely on temporary wetlands, between 10 cm to 1 m deep, for breeding. Active late May to autumn and hibernate below the frost line in winter.

**Threats:** Loss and degradation of native prairie, and the associated natural wetlands, is likely the largest threat. Other threats include draining wetlands, flood control, cultivation of temporary wetlands in dry years, pesticides, industrial development and road kills.



## Great plains toad *Data deficient (AB), Special concern (CAN)*

**Description:** Pale brown-gray or olive coloured with large dark green blotches that are sometimes symmetrical on each side of the back. Tiny warts are scattered on their backs. Whitish belly with no spotting. Distinguished from other toads by L shaped ridges around the eyes that join to form a bump between the eyes. Length is between 4.5 - 11.4 cm. Male calls are rapidly repeating, harsh, metallic-sounding trills that can be heard up to 2 km away.

**Status:** Six known population clusters in southeastern Alberta and likely many more that have not been observed due to the challenges of monitoring a mostly nocturnal species that generally appears only after rainfall events. Estimates in Alberta range from 2,100 - 10,000 individual toads.

**Habitat:** Dry grasslands of central North America where coarse, sandy soils allow it to burrow into the ground during hot, dry conditions and to hibernate in winter. Breed in temporary, shallow, clear pools with plenty of vegetation from mid-May to late-June. Require heavy rainfall to emerge. Active from late April to September but only at night or on overcast days.

**Threats:** Loss and degradation of native prairie and associated wetlands is the biggest threat. Prolonged drought, pesticides, disease and road kills are also threats.



### BENEFICIAL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR TOADS:

- Protect remaining native prairie and sandy areas from cultivation or development.
- Prevent permanent or temporary wetlands from being drained or cultivated.
- Avoid the use of pesticides or herbicides in marginal agricultural land or near wetlands.
- Strategically place salt blocks away from wetlands and riparian areas.
- Avoid creating dugouts in critical toad temporary breeding ponds.
- Monitor cattle use of your wetlands and prevent their degradation or destruction.



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