



GRASSLAND GAZETTE

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T'was the Fall of 2002

It was a dark and dreary fall day and not even a species at risk was stirring. The looming Species-At-Risk Act was on everyone's mind. How was the federal government going to handle the impending listing of species at risk and what did it mean to the landowners of southern Alberta. For you see the highest density of species at risk in Alberta was found in the Milk River Basin. Would there be biologist after biologist, tasked with the conservation of a single listed species, at my door daily thought landowners in the area.

The above narrative is really the story behind how MULTISAR came to be in 2002. As SARA became legislation and single species programs popped up around Canada, the writing on the wall was clear that an alternative approach was needed. MULTISAR sought and continues to look at the conservation of species at risk



from a multi-species landscape perspective. It works with landowners to devise conservation plans not only for a suite of species but under the realistic pressure faced by landowners of maintaining economically viable operations. Understanding these two factors is why MULTISAR is celebrating its 10 year.

When you build a house, time is required at the beginning to make sure the foundation is solid. This reality was used by MULTISAR in the beginning – the need to build a solid foundation for the program. The initial 2 years were focused on detailed inventories of the listed species at risk found within the Milk River Basin, but more importantly the building of relationships both within and external to the program. Time and effort was put into establishing relationships between the key players within the MULTISAR program; Alberta Conservation Association, Alberta Fish and Wildlife and Alberta Public lands. Time was also put towards coffee table meetings with landowners to discuss species at risk conservation, the concept of a multi-species approach and to build lasting relationships. Openness, trust and respect are the foundation that MULTISAR is known for.

And with every house there have been changes as time has passed. Starting off the focus was on developing Habitat Conservation Strategies (HCS) for individual ranches and still is the priority of the program. Coupled with these plans is assistance to help ensure on the ground changes are made based on the recommendations from the conservation team that are found in the individual plans. And as time passed we added an information and education component to the program, to help address landowner requests from areas outside of the programs core area. The development of Species-At-Risk Conservation (SARC) Plans have filled this role and provide an avenue for landowners to become more aware of the needs and potential strategies for species at risk that could occur on their ranch. Hopefully in 2027 MULTISAR will be celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Getting to know the **MULTISAR** Team



Back from left to right: Jennifer Richman, Kristen Rumbolt-Miller, Julie Landry-DeBoer, Brandy Downey.
Front from left to right: Kenneth Pitcher, Brad Downey, Lee Moltzahn, Darryl Jarina, François Blouin.
Missing: Paul Jones.

Brad Downey is a Project Coordinator and Wildlife Biologist for MULTISAR with the Alberta Conservation Association. He has work on the MULTISAR Program since its inception in 2002. Brad grew up in rural southwest Manitoba and enjoyed being outdoors camping and fishing. He now has a wife and two boys who enjoy camping and fishing as well. He enjoys getting out to the grasslands and into the Milk River Watershed as it reminds him of where he grew up (few more trees though in Manitoba). He feels that one of MULTISAR's biggest achievements over the past ten years is the relationships that have been built with so many landowners across the grasslands.

Brandy Downey joined the MULTISAR team in 2003, starting as a MULTISAR field biologist, then as one of the program coordinators and finally landing in role responsible for management and supervision of the program. During this time Brandy's personal life has changed significantly, from a single girl to a married woman with 2 boys. Despite these changes one of her greatest joys is still heading out early, watching the sun rise over the grassland and listening to the amazing diversity of grassland birds Alberta has to offer. She cannot wait to share these experiences with her two boys.

Darryl Jarina is a wildlife biologist who has been with MULTISAR since May of 2006. Born and raised in Sparwood, B.C., Darryl grew up fishing, hunting, hiking, and camping throughout the mountains near his home. This love of the outdoors led him to Lethbridge and Calgary for post-secondary schooling. These days he spends most of his time hanging out with his wife Michelle, and children Avery and Olivia, and still tries to get outdoors as much as he can. His most memorable moment with MULTISAR was in 2006. While watching the Stanley Cup finals, an incredible rain storm rolled through that instantly flooded nearby fields. The subsequent roar of toads off in the distance soon led to a night of amphibian surveys.

François Blouin is a Project Coordinator and Wildlife Biologist for MULTISAR with the Prairie Conservation Forum. He is the French connection to MULTISAR as he grew up on a dairy farm near Sherbrooke, Quebec prior to moving out west. He lives with his wife and two children in Lethbridge but gets out in nature as much as possible avoiding any chance of nature-deficit disorder. He feels very privileged to be able to visit some of the most pristine grassland landscapes and observe its wildlife while working with MULTISAR. He admits that, despite the two flat tires that resulted from the multiple cactus thorns, riding a mountain bike on a remote native pasture at sunrise to survey wildlife was a very memorable moment for him.

Jennifer Richman is the Rangeland Advisor for MULTISAR and Area Range Management Specialist with ESRD and has worked with MULTISAR since 2004. Jennifer grew up in Southern Alberta on a ranch along the Oldman River near Hays, wandering the hills looking for tipi rings and wildflowers. After attending the University of Alberta to study Rangeland Management, she landed her dream job with the Lands Division of ESRD doing research and extension activities. Working with MULTISAR has given Jenn a heightened appreciation for an increasingly complex landscape filled with hardworking ranching families, rangelands, wildlife, industry, and ever increasing demands on resources.

Julie Landry-DeBoer is a wildlife biologist with the Alberta Conservation Association and has worked with MULTISAR since 2003. She grew up on a crop and livestock farm along the Red River in southern Manitoba and her love for the outdoors was molded by the countless hours spent in and around an oxbow lake. Her personal interests include spending time with her husband and her 2 kids, birding, hiking, singing, and volunteering for her local church and community. One of the things she values most about MULTISAR are all the “firsts” she has had the chance to experience such as: Discovering 2 pairs of burrowing owl within eye sight of each other, noticing a camouflaged pronghorn fawn, witnessing a flock of white-faced ibis, finding tipi rings, etc. She looks forward to many more “firsts”.



Kenneth Pitcher - you could say Ken is the recycled member of the MULTISAR team. He worked as a Rangeland Agrologist for MULTISAR in 2008/09 and rejoined the program again in 2012. Ken has enjoyed living and working in Alberta for most of his life spending his childhood and adolescent years in Champion, a small prairie town. His interests and joys in life include fostering family relationships, contributing to his church organization as a mentor and volunteer, gardening and yard work, and spending time enjoying the amazing natural setting available to us in North America. A memorable moments working with MULTISAR was a summer day in 2008 when two pairs of burrowing owls were spotted along the river flat of the Milk River followed by the unveiling of a large grouping of tipi rings. Both discoveries pointed to the great heritage we enjoy in Southern Alberta.

Kristen Rumbolt-Miller is a wildlife biologist who joined the MULTISAR team in 2008. She grew up in Newfoundland and spent her summers camping and hiking, during which, watching wildlife grew to be her favourite activity. Kristen attended the University of Guelph (Ontario) and after which, headed west to Alberta. In her spare time, Kristen and her husband, Andrew, love to travel. In 2010, they travelled to Tanzania, Africa, where they scaled Mt. Kilimanjaro. Kristen says her most memorable moments with MULTISAR “are those early mornings on the prairie, when the sun is rising and everything comes alive. So few people get to experience nature on the prairies in this way.”

Lee Moltzahn is a range technician, who joined the MULTISAR team in September of 2010. Encouragement and values instilled by his grandparents, who had a small ranch, led him to pursue a career in rangeland management. Descended from pioneer stock, Lee was raised in the small, rural community of Nobleford, where he remains active in the local museum society and his little country church. In addition to volunteer activities, Lee keeps busy with his two boys (dogs), gardening, camping, curling, genealogy research, and caring for the ever increasing menagerie of llamas, ducks, and chickens at the family farm at Fort Macleod. Lee is engaged to Christina and they plan to be wed in June of 2013. A memorable moment occurred this past summer; while conducting rangeland assessments southeast of Manyberries, Lee and a summer staff stumbled across an eastern short-horned lizard. This was a previously unknown population!



Paul Jones has been with the MULTISAR program since its beginning as one of the founding fathers along with Richard Quinlan. Born in England, he grew up in Grande Cache, nestled in the mountains of west-central Alberta. This is where his passion for fishing, hiking and wildlife developed and at an early age of 13 said he was going to be a biologist. Paul’s connection to the prairies began during his time at the University of Lethbridge. This is the time when he met his wife and started a family, having a daughter in 2004. A memorable MULTISAR moment and source of great pride for Paul has been watching Brad and Brandy Downey progress in their careers from project technicians to now leading the MULTISAR program.



Ross Ranch: Maintaining wildlife habitat since 1885



The First Collaborator

John Ross owns and manages approximately 62,000 acres of prime native grasslands that not only provides habitat for numerous wildlife but also supports an economically viable cattle operation. The Ross family has been ranching since 1885 with the ranch being incorporated in the Northwest Territories in 1905, before Alberta was a province. In 2004, John and his family were the first ranchers to collaborate with MULTISAR to look into ways that they could continue to maintain and enhance habitat for wildlife as well as benefit their cattle operation.

In the past John had been staying away from participating with conservation groups due to what he felt was a top down approach (i.e. telling landholders what to do). After working with Cows and Fish though he thought MULTISAR sounded like it worked similar, where you collaborate and work together in partnership...more of a grass roots approach. Over the years a strong partnership has developed as John explains “it’s been really good, if not then I wouldn’t have kept going otherwise”. Several habitat enhancements have been implemented and new ones are planned for the ranch. John says working with MULTISAR “Opens your eyes a little more about the species on your land and the different things that you take for granted. I enjoy the multispecies approach as the single species approach seems to be at the cost of everything else and you need to look at the whole picture not just one species.”

John and MULTISAR look forward to another 10 years of collaboration as having a Habitat Conservation Strategy completed for his ranch “acknowledges the good range management practices on your ranch and provides due diligence” says John. MULTISAR thanks John and his family for their support and continued collaboration with the program as without the ranching community most of the habitat and species that use it would be lost.



Landowners Helping Wildlife: 5 Years of Species At Risk Conservation Plans

After several years of delivering Habitat Conservation Strategies to landowners in the Milk River Basin, MULTISAR decided in 2007 to develop a more condensed tool to respond to the needs of landowners across the entire Grassland Natural Region of Alberta. Species At Risk Conservation Plans (SARC Plans) consist of a series of beneficial management recommendations that are ranch/property specific and are developed following an assessment of wildlife habitats present on a ranch. Inspired from the more extensive Habitat Conservation Strategies, the ultimate goal of a SARC Plan is to provide practical information for the maintenance and improvement of wildlife habitat in a way that is compatible with the current use of the land.

MULTISAR has completed SARC Plans with landowners all over the Grassland Natural Region, including Bruce Mowat, who runs a cow/calf operation with his wife Marianne, in the Porcupine Hills. Here, the landscape is a dramatic one. Sweeping views of the Rocky Mountains are almost overshadowed with the beauty of the surrounding landscape; slopes of foothills rough fescue, rocky outcrops dotted with limber pine, and an array of wildlife, from the familiar mountain bluebird to the endangered ferruginous hawk, for which the Porcupine Hills is the western extent of their range.

With a landscape this precious, Bruce felt it was important to have a professional view of the ranch and liked the idea of it all coming together in a single report. Since it was completed in 2008, Bruce has shared his SARC Plan with his neighbours, and as a result, many of them have also come forward to get their own personalized plan. As Bruce puts it, “there is power in numbers of people all working together”.

Sitting in Bruce and Marianne’s kitchen, not only will you receive the best coffee and homemade chocolate cake you’ve ever had, but you’ll also hear stories from over 100 years of history on their ranch, many about their encounters with wildlife and how the landscape has changed over the years. “There have been several first time sightings of species here on the ranch in the last few years, like grizzly bear and wolverine. It’s a daily job to protect the ranch from the outside world and we need all the help we can get, like MULTISAR, to protect it”.

Bruce and Marianne are one of the 75 families of ranchers and landowners that have turned to MULTISAR for tools and information to help species at risk and other wildlife in their operation. MULTISAR would like to thank Bruce and Marianne for their promotion of MULTISAR and the SARC Plan program and for their tireless efforts in caring for the land and all of its inhabitants.

10 YEAR
ANNIVERSARY

MULTISAR - THE

As MULTISAR celebrates its 10th year of existence, we owe to ask ourselves “what next?” MULTISAR has been and will continue to be an evolving program, seeking the best approach to harmonize the needs of landowners and lease holders as they draw their living from the land and continue their ranching lifestyle, with the needs of plant, fish and wildlife species dependant on healthy native prairie habitats. The two seem an easy fit, as the natural prairie ecosystem has evolved with and adapted to grazers. As such, sustainable ranching offers the most compatible land use for prairie grasslands and its inhabitants.

However, as Alberta’s population continues to grow and attempts to remain competitive and prosper in a world market, pressures on remaining natural grasslands will increase. MULTISAR will continue its efforts to find mutually agreeable and economically viable solutions to 1) minimize the loss and degradation of natural prairie habitats, 2) optimize the suitability of the remaining tracts of native prairie, 3) increase connectivity between them, 4) convert marginal land back to native prairie where suitable and desired by the landowner and 5) develop habitat projects to assist with the recovery of species at risk.

MULTISAR’s work is highly influenced by provincial and national policies, legislations and planning processes regarding biodiversity and land use. In the short term, the Species At Risk Act (SARA) is undergoing a review which is likely to translate into changes to this federal legislation. Federal Environment Minister Peter Kent wants to make the act “more efficient” and have recovery plans consider entire ecosystems as opposed to species taken in isolation. That’s already the approach that MULTISAR is taking in the prairie ecosystem of Alberta.



NEXT 10 YEARS



Carla Koenig

MULTISAR will monitor the changes to SARA and will work in having its voluntary Habitat Conservation Strategies (HCSs) recognized as providing “due diligence” in the protection of “critical habitat”.

In addition, public and stakeholder consultations are underway at the time of this article on the draft South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP). Currently, the large majority of MULTISAR’s activities are delivered within the SSRP area. It is also where the greatest density of species at risk in Alberta can be found. It is without a doubt that in the longer term, the outcome of the SSRP and the legislation associated with it will influence how and where MULTISAR operates.

Albertans are very privileged to still be able to experience some wilderness in the prairie landscape and to benefit from the essential ecological goods and services that this system provides us with. We owe to the ranching community the fact that we still have native prairie habitats and we can still observe burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks, Sprague’s pipits, swift fox, northern leopard frogs, tiny cryptanthus, and mouse-ear cress in our prairies, to name only those.

MULTISAR recognizes and values the work of ranchers in sustaining our grasslands, its fauna and flora and hopes to be able to continue working with them for at least another 10 years to find win-win-win solutions for cattle, wild species, and ranchers.

Highlight of MULTISAR's Achievements: 2002-2012

- 25 Ranching family partnerships for Habitat Conservation Strategies on 275,000 acres.
- 90 Species At Risk Conservation Plans on 170,000 acres.
- 54 Habitat enhancements based on the MULTISAR Beneficial Management Practices including:
 - o 5 Native reseeding projects on 1,390 acres of previously under utilized marginal cropland.
 - o 9 Portable watering sites, to improve cattle distribution throughout the pastures and improve wildlife habitat.
 - o 7 Upland watering sites to limit cattle's use of the riparian areas, improve cattle distribution and improve wildlife habitat in both the riparian areas and uplands.
 - o 3 Tree protection projects, to protect nests of the endangered ferruginous hawk while still allowing cattle protection from the elements.
 - o 1 Cottonwood protection project to protect young seedlings and encourage a new stand of cotton woods along the Milk River.
 - o 11 Artificial nesting structures, primarily for ferruginous hawks to provide producers with a natural control for ground squirrel problems
 - o 8 Wildlife friendly fence projects (32 km) to facilitate wildlife movement. An additional 75 km of wildlife friendly fencing has been completed on MULTISAR participating lands by Alberta Fish and Game Association.
 - o 4 Native shrub planting projects for a total of 2,596 shrubs, creating natural cover for both cattle and wildlife.
 - o 6 Weed control projects, 2 using biological controls, to limit the negative impacts of noxious weeds range health.
- Implementations of actions from 10 Alberta Species at Risk Recovery Plans.
- Communication with 1,500 Albertans annually.
- Built partnerships with landholders, landholder groups, non-government organizations and government to achieve conservation of multiple species at risk, and native grasslands on a working landscape.



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