

What's the SAR in MULTISAR? ...and Why Should I Care?

By Richard Quinlan, Provincial Species at Risk Specialist

What's the SAR in MULTISAR all about? No, it's not some strange disease, SAR is short for "Species at Risk", a catch-all phrase for endangered and threatened species, and some others that need special management to keep them from disappearing. There are about 25 species at risk in Alberta's grassland natural region including some we are used to referring to as wildlife: mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, and they also include some fish, plants, and invertebrates.

So What? Why should I care? Well many of you already do care, not because of the science or politics, but because species at risk are wild things in natural places and you value that. And yes, it's true that we humans do need nature and nowadays nature also needs us. If you don't care, consider that somebody else does care and that should be enough reason for you to begin to care. In fact many Canadians cared enough that they pressured the federal government for over a decade to establish a federal Species at Risk Act in 2002. And Albertans also cared enough to force amendments of the Wildlife Act in 1996 to list many endangered and threatened species, and to start recovery programs for them.

You own your land, and maybe you also lease land that your family has a long history of investment and sweat equity in. You have a right to protect your private ownership from intrusion, and if you've been managing your lease land well you should continue to have first opportunity to it. But, whether you like it or not, by law you do not own the species at risk on your land, but rather they are owned by all Albertans. Ah, but they would not be there without your good management, right? Yes, right, but not everybody knows or appreciates that. MULTISAR aims to get that fact out to the general public.

And what about those more radical activists who may care so deeply for the environment that they forget about the people who make their livelihood on the land? *Continued on page 2.*

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Prairie Falcon



Swift Fox

...the best way to keep somebody out of your operation is to be able to demonstrate that you are already doing the job right. MULTISAR can help you do that.



Short-horned Lizard



Northern Leopard Frogs

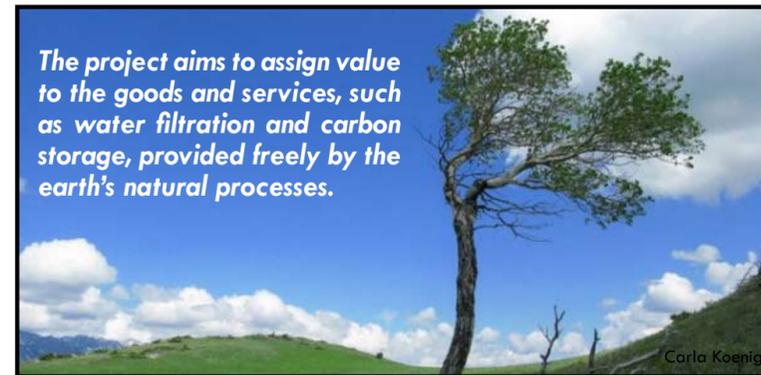
Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum:

Evaluating natural goods and services

By Katheryn Taylor, PCF Co-Coordinator

In today's society we have a keen understanding of the economy and the major factors that influence it. We can easily recall the price of gas, the cost of clothes, groceries and movies. But even the most dedicated citizen would have trouble identifying the value of a wetland's ability to filter water or a grassland's ability to store carbon, hold the soil together and provide forage for livestock and wildlife. We tend to take these natural goods and services (often called ecological goods and services) for granted, even though we depend on them for our very survival and to keep our economy strong. Replacing these natural goods and services with technology may be impossible or too costly to be feasible.

The Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF) understands the need to start taking natural goods and services into account, which is why an exciting new project has been initiated; the Prairie and Parkland Ecosystem Goods and Services Valuation Project. The project aims to assign value to the goods and services, such as water filtration and carbon storage, provided freely by the earth's natural processes. It will also account for social/cultural values and ecological values in addition to traditional economic values. The end product will be a representation of the total value that can be used as a tool for making land use decisions and planning for resource management. This project will aid in conservation of grasslands and parklands by raising awareness of the importance of natural goods and services and by providing a tool for assessing their value.



Phase 1 of the project has been completed and included the design of an approach to conducting a small-scale pilot project that integrates all economic, social and ecological values on the landscape. The strategy involves effective incorporation of stakeholder input, insights and considerations into the design and implementation of the project by means of a stakeholder workshop. Currently, the PCF is in the process of looking for funding and support to complete the subsequent phases of the Prairie and Parkland Ecosystem Goods and Services Valuation Project.

The Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum is a large voluntary coalition of stakeholder groups whose members are interested in the conservation of native prairie and parkland environments in Alberta. The Forum allows members to share knowledge about work that has been done on the prairies and work that is currently being done on the prairies, as well as to form partnerships for future projects. Currently, the Forum has approximately 45 members from diverse backgrounds (such as agriculture, conservation, industry, academia, and government) participating in carrying out the current Prairie Conservation Action Plan, 2006-2010. For more information about the PCF, visit www.albertapcf.org



Is there something you would like us to write about? Do you have any suggestions?

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What's the SAR in MULTISAR? ...continued from page 1:

What if they decide to get assertive or even use legal avenues to try to change how the Alberta government and landholders do things on the land? Well, that's where due diligence comes into play. In other words, the best way to keep somebody out of your operation is to be able to demonstrate that you are already doing the job right. MULTISAR can help you do that. Years from now history will show that MULTISAR participants who had Species at Risk Conservation Plans or Habitat Conservation Strategies completed for their land, and who managed according to them, will have been immune from federal government and third party intrusions upon their land.

I am Alberta's provincial specialist for species at risk. I care about species at risk for all the reasons above. I care enough to have built my career around species at risk. I'm further motivated by the fact that if Alberta cannot demonstrate effective management of species at risk, then a "safety net" clause in the federal Species at Risk Act might be negotiated into place, transferring jurisdiction of Alberta's species at risk from the provincial government to the federal government. MULTISAR is going to be a big part of preventing that from ever happening. MULTISAR will enable us to work with landholders, not against them, on the conservation and recovery of multiple species at risk.

MULTISAR is a joint initiative of the Alberta Conservation Association, other conservation organizations and landholders, working along with Alberta Fish and Wildlife and Lands Division of the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development. Your participation in MULTISAR will provide you with the tools to conserve and recover species at risk on your land through a voluntary collaborative approach. This will help to provide a secure future for the species at risk as well as for those who make their living from the land – those who care.

Species at Risk Myths and Realities

Myth 1 - The government can take land away from you if species at risk are found on it, or they will tell you how you are allowed to manage your land.

Reality - The Alberta Wildlife Act does not provide any authority to take control of private lands. The Alberta government has jurisdiction on all private land and public land except military reserves, national parks and First Nations reservations. The Alberta government has a long record of working cooperatively with landholders on wildlife conservation matters and what you do on your land is up to you. MULTISAR provides recommendations for enhancing species at risk habitat but implementation is voluntary.

Myth 2 - Species at risk are best left alone in Alberta, the problems are happening in other countries when animals migrate and there's nothing we can do about it.

Reality - There are many things we can do in Alberta to help our plants and animals. Not all species at risk are migratory and we can take responsibility for our own actions and set an example for other countries. Keeping native grasslands for grazing instead of crop production, grazing after July 15 to allow animals to raise their young and limiting access to wetlands and streams are a few examples.

If nothing had been done there would be no Swift Fox in Alberta and no Northern Leopard Frogs along Pothole Creek or the Red Deer River where they have been reintroduced.

Myth 3 - There are a lot more of some species out there than the government knows about. Miscounting them leads to unnecessary concern and actions.

Reality - Getting an exact count of all individuals that make up a population is difficult so biologists rely on sampling methods that provide an "estimate" or an "index" of the total population. When the same method is repeated over a long time in any given area, it provides a trend in the population for that area, regardless of whether we know the exact number of individuals. There are reasons to be concerned when the long term population trend is negative. This indicates that something is affecting the population and, if left unchecked may result in the loss of the species. If surveys reveal a species is much more abundant than was previously thought, it will be downlisted (ex. Western blue flag was downlisted from threatened to special concern because new populations were found).



Burrowing Owl



Greater Sage Grouse



Prairie Rattlesnake



Loggerhead Shrike



Plains Spadefoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse

In Brief

Greencover grant provides funding for BMP implementation

In July 2008 MULTISAR received a grant from the Greencover Canada Technical Assistance Program to help landholders implement beneficial management practices (BMPs) and serve as demonstration sites. Six landholders have partnered with MULTISAR to implement BMPs including fencing off a river, a creek, a wetland and two shelterbelts, installing two artificial burrowing owl nest burrows and completing range health assessments. An artificial hawk nesting structure will be installed where an active nest has fallen once weather and ground conditions permit.

Release of Species at Risk Strategy sets priorities for next 5 years

Direction for Alberta's management of species at risk and priorities for the next five years have been clearly outlined with the release of Alberta's Strategy for the Management of Species at Risk (2009-2014). Alberta has had a well established program since the 1980s that has provided conservation and recovery for plants and animals at risk of disappearing from the province. The strategy points towards recovery for prairie species, increased efforts for invertebrates, fish and plants and a focus on multi species management through MULTISAR. See www.srd.alberta.ca/fishwildlife/species-at-risk/strategy2009/default.aspx for more information.

Events highlight education initiatives

MULTISAR's education and awareness program had an exciting year. We helped organize a Grasslands Institute for teachers, the Southern Alberta Grazing School for Women and a field trip for grade five students to learn about northern leopard frogs. Two species at risk interpretive signs were designed and installed at the Etzikom Museum and several presentations were given to grade seven classes.

Sharing our Story: 7 Half Diamond Cattle Company



John feeding the herd with Tucker & Winston (right).

John and Deana Martin's family have moved ranches three times, have travelled to Saskatchewan and back before finding a home on the Little Bow River. They've survived big ranches, big cities and big losses but have kept their commitment to their land, wildlife and water.

The Martin ranch envelopes a section of the Little Bow River and its coulees, making management of pastures on the floodplain a careful balance. John and Deana are fencing off the prairie river to protect its water quality and to provide their cattle with clean water from off-stream troughs. MULTISAR was able to help the Martin's complete their stewardship project through a grant received from the federal government's Greencover Technical Assistance Program to setup demonstration sites. MULTISAR works with landowners to assess and enhance habitat for disappearing plants and animals on the prairies. Dwayne Rogness, Lethbridge County's Conservation Coordinator, introduced the Martin's to MULTISAR to help with their stewardship project. The Martin's welcome Dwayne's and MULTISAR's fresh perspectives and enjoy sharing their own knowledge as well.

John and Deana have learned a lot over the years and are using their wisdom to grow their newly purchased operation in a way that is compatible with the prairie environment. Grazing their native grasses in the fall and letting their pastures rest through rotational grazing are key to the operation. They are able to use tame pastures for most of the growing season and are experimenting with new forages to maximize their returns. To assist them in monitoring changes to their grasslands MULTISAR, through Greencover, was able to provide the Martins with professional range health assessments and vegetation inventories. This information will help them adjust their grazing plan and balance stocking rates with changing range conditions.

Keeping informed and learning new tricks is important to their ranch but the Martin family also enjoys a little bit of the past. They use draft horses and wagons to move feed and spend time training horses and dogs to move cattle; an enjoyable and profitable hobby, if they can bear to sell any. They also shepherd 30 sheep that serve as lawn mowers and weed pullers, rarely needing feed or even pasture in the summer months. Ditches, pens, roadsides and the yard are ideal dining areas for these frugal grazers.

Starting fresh in Alberta presents the Martin family with many challenges but they are excited about growing their herd and learning the intricacies of their land. MULTISAR was able to help John and Deana complete their fencing project and will help them share their story by featuring them as a demonstration site for others to learn from. Their responsible management in leaving litter and allowing rest provides insurance against drought, maintains habitat for wildlife and will allow their children to enjoy the ranch well into the future.



Bob Gilchrist

Carla Koenig

Lois Gilchrist

Minimizing impacts from gas development on Deer Creek Ranch

By Tom Gilchrist, Deer Creek Ranch

Rozsa Petroleum drilled its first well on the ranch in 1981. That was the beginning of a major exploration and production program, first for Rozsa and then for Canadian Natural Resources Limited and Encana. These exploration and drilling programs resulted in the construction of two compressor stations to export natural gas to the United States. The first well suffered a blow out but no fire or other damage. That well was drilled with a right of entry order as a result of a land man that didn't have time to accommodate negotiations for an access route. After the blow out was contained, Mr. Rozsa and I reached agreement on the outstanding issues in his shack at the well site. The next well surface lease contained a page of our requirements that set out terms for fencing, fire, water supply and productions issues. This page was in addition to the usual requirements of Public Lands for a well on our long term grazing lease. The philosophy behind this approach was to set the boundaries for the actions of the resource company and its contractors in advance of the drilling program. The document also set the penalties for non-compliance as well as the compensation payable to Deer Creek if a fire should occur. Deer Creek has, over the years, collected on all clauses without argument or legal action.

The page was modified as required to suit current practice and our experience in managing the impact of seismic programs, drilling and pipeline installation. All well sites now use a zero surface disturbance program with mud sprayed on suitable crop land. Procedures for access trail development were adopted to eliminate abandonment reclamation. All trails with extensive production traffic are stabilized by filling the worn out ruts with gravel. When traffic ceases, adjacent grass gradually encroaches across the gravel, leaving a nearly natural surface appearance. No reseeding is required. The visual impact of the surface production installations is also important to the ranch. Surface installations are required to comply with the Deer Creek paint code, a light sand color, that lets the equipment blend into the grass landscape. The maximum height of tank units may also be specified to decrease the visual intrusion of the installation.

Access to new well sites are required to utilize existing ranch trails, existing development trails or be located to diminish the possible problems of erosion and year round access. Before occupation of a new well site occurs or before a pipeline project commences Deer Creek specifies that the contractors must meet with Deer Creek to go over the project and discuss all aspects as they relate to Deer Creek's requirements. The contractors often offer input that when adopted decreases the impact of the operation. Thus, all players are reading from the same page. This initial cooperative effort pays huge dividends for all concerned and virtually eliminates confrontation as the project is implemented. The field operator is also required to notify Deer Creek before a well service operation is to commence. This alerts us to increased traffic and fire hazard. We visit with the consultant at the site to make sure he understands our requirements.

Deer Creek has worked closely with Public Lands over the years to suggest ways to reduce the impact of gas development on the ranch. Reseeding of a pipeline right of way has always been a contentious issue. Deer Creek insists that the trench area be stripped of six inches of topsoil, pile it separately from the trenched subsoil and then feather the topsoil over the disturbed area on completion of the operation. This allows the seeds in the topsoil to be positioned for growth when moisture arrives. Reseeding of the disturbed area is done with prairie type species. Seeding is best done in early April to take advantage of spring moisture. Growth is available for grazing from that year on. If no reseeding is done, natural reseeding takes several years with the inherent loss of production over that time frame.

The resource companies that operate on the ranch have become excellent corporate citizens as their operations impact the grass and landscape of our public and private land holdings. The compressor stations are nicely painted in one color and are a visual credit to the company. Good dialogue is the underlying principle that forms the base for the respect that has been developed between the ranch and the resource extraction companies.

SPECIES PROFILE:

Ferruginous Hawk

At Risk - Endangered

Description:

Ferruginous hawks are the **largest** hawks in Alberta. Their colour varies from very light chest with dark legs to very dark chest with lighter tail. Both dark and light coloured hawks have a **bright yellow upper beak** and the underside of their tails are unbanded and light.

Status:

Listed as **endangered** in Alberta and *special concern* in Canada. This hawk's North American population has been reduced to 1/4 of its past population estimate and 65% of Canada's population breeds in Alberta. A 2005 population inventory estimated there are 618 (+/- 162) pairs left in Alberta; the lowest estimate to date and half of the 1992 estimate.

Habitat:

Ferruginous hawks along with burrowing owls are the only raptors in Alberta that use grasslands as their main habitat. These hawks decrease in numbers when cultivation increases and require large tracts of **native grasslands** to hunt for Richardson's ground squirrels, their main food source. Ferruginous hawks build large nests, up to 1.5m wide and 3m deep, mostly in **lone trees** surrounded by native grasslands but sometimes on cliffs or on the ground. They migrate back to Alberta to breed and nest in March, often returning to the same nest, and fly south in September or October for the winter.

Threats:

The greatest threats to continuing decline of this species is **habitat loss from cultivation, tree removal and the cumulative impacts of industrial and infrastructure development**. Ferruginous hawks are sensitive to disturbance and may abandon their nest or will raise fewer young if disturbed. Other more moderate threats include electrocution, collisions, acreage development and decrease in prey availability.

Fish and Wildlife is currently conducting an inventory of artificial nesting structures. If you know of any hawk pole location please contact Francois at 403-381-5318 or email Francois.Blouin@gov.ab.ca.



Gordon Court

Corey Skiftun



Carla Koenig



Carla Koenig

Don't Forget your Range Health Assessments!

Awareness has been growing of the importance of performing range health assessments on grasslands, forests and tame pastures but many producers forget they need to be completed on a regular basis.

Regular range health assessments keep you informed of subtle changes to your pastures and keep your eyes tuned to the process. Try to push through the barriers keeping you from performing assessments and remember that as your experience increases they will take less time and you will become very comfortable performing them. The rewards will be well worth your effort!

Field Workbooks, Range Plant Community Guides and help and advice can be found at your local Public Lands office. Digital copies can also be found online:

Field workbooks:

www.srd.alberta.ca/lands/managingpublicland/rangemanagement/healthassessment.aspx

Range plant community guides:

www.srd.alberta.ca/lands/managingpublicland/rangemanagement/classificationecology.aspx