

THE ALBERTA WILDLIFER

VOLUME 25 ISSUE 3

AUGUST 25, 2014

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- **Biologist profile: Dr. Evie Merrel**
- **Endangered species**

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Who speaks for Endangered Species 2

Interview with a biologist—Evie Merrell 4

Canadian section update 6

Video games and biology 7

AESRD Wetland Policy 8

Wildlife Regulations renewal 10

Upcoming events 12

ACTWS President's Report

Kashif M. Sheikh



President's Note:

I am going to keep this brief to say hello and hoping that you have had the best of summer, natural visitation and wilderness experiences.

We Are Wetlands: Recently we have reached out to the Premier of Alberta and the Minister of Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development and raised our concerns regarding the upcoming Alberta Wetland Policy. Please see the full text separately in the newsletter. However, I would also encourage you to look at the new policy and measure implications of the policy on the pristine and unique wetland wealth of Alberta and its impact on the natural landscape. We all need to weigh-in our efforts on this important issue.

2015 Conference: Executive is busy in planning the ACTWS 2015 conference. The theme of the conference will emphasize Conservation Advocacy. Mark your calendars for March 2015 to be held in Edmonton, AB. This is going to be a very stimulating conference that will excite lots of professional circles in Alberta and Canada. ACTWS look forward to your participation and seeing you next March. Please do send your ideas to make this annual event even more productive.

I am also requesting that you please send new and emerging findings from your ongoing work and share it with the wider memberships through articles that we can publish in the newsletter.

Very best,

Kashif M. Sheikh Ph.D., P.Biol.

Who Speaks for Endangered Species?

By
Lorne
Fitch,
P. Biol.

“It shouldn’t be just the Canadian government speaking for endangered species; it should be all of us.”

There is a tendency on the part of some (notably industry, some landowners and remarkably our provincial government) to see protection of endangered species as a conspiracy to rob them of privileges and opportunities. It just isn’t that simple.

If all of us would step back from the rhetoric and handwringing over entitlements, conspiracy theory, perceived economic loss, usurping of provincial rights by federal decree, perception of personal property rights infringement, and the mythical heavy hand of government we might see another perspective.

Wild species are going missing at a rate unparalleled since dinosaurs disappeared. The root cause of this, especially with grassland species is we have used up the majority of the space for our purposes, in the form of cultivation, urban development, petroleum extraction, transportation networks and a myriad of smaller but additive game-changing shifts of native habitat to a shadow of what was formerly available.

The intent of species at risk legislation is to rebalance the stakes in favor of imperiled species, giving them a life boat of sorts to reduce the risk of them winking out of existence.

Sage grouse are caught in the controversy between those who see diminished population status as a failure to manage and protect habitat and those who see efforts to stem the tide of possible extirpation as a conflict with exercising free and full economic opportunity.



When we reach the edge of a cliff, as we have with sage grouse, the alternatives disappear. Either we do something to arrest the downward trend in grouse numbers, or we step back and watch them disappear from Alberta after a residency that is approximately 10,000 years long. Species at risk legislation fortunately won’t allow us to take the later easy route, no matter how comfortable and economically advantageous it might seem to be.

There is precious little wiggle room left after years of government foot-dragging amid the race to exploit natural resources. The tired old refrains of mitigation, more research and enhanced land use guidelines are an attempt to drag the debate on longer, without actually doing anything helpful for grouse recovery. Einstein’s quote, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them” resonates strongly.

We can’t, or don’t bother to recall what the landscape looked like when the ecosystem was in balance. There is an expectation, based on no evidence that sage grouse will persist on fragmented landscapes as we pile compromise upon compromise to “resolve” each new calamity.

Who Speaks for Endangered Species? Continued . . .

It is an often repeated theme with many of Alberta's similarly imperiled wild species including westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, caribou and a longer list of species not yet imperiled but queuing up for that line. An example would be antelope, another species iconic of prairie Alberta that finds itself in an increasingly fragmented and diminished grassland world.

The dilemma of sage grouse is a classic failure to plan, the timidity of resource management, the inability to see and respond to critical thresholds and the intransigence of all of us to act responsibly, quickly and decisively before a species fades into oblivion.

All of us, governments, industry, academia, conservationists, landowners and the public have a duty to ensure sage grouse (and others) are allowed to survive and recover. The debate isn't about whether they should be saved but rather how to save them and how quickly we need to act. Two essentials for any wild species are place and space. In the case of sage grouse, they and their habitats are intertwined, interconnected and incapable of being separated.

Lyndon B. Johnson, America's 36th president and a campaigner for civil rights, social issues and the environment once declared:

"If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt then we must leave them with something more than the miracle of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning."

If we took the perspective we are building our province and our communities to last forever, instead of just to the next election, or to the next resource revenue check or next shopping trip, our take on endangered species would be remarkably different I think. We need to face the hard question; are we stewards of the land and all of its resources or, are we trapped in a spiral of instant gratification and gluttony with no sense of responsibility to future generations?

If we can protect some places and spaces for sage grouse and allow recovery of populations to more robust levels, the intended effects will benefit other species. It may well be that our own species will need these places with natural expressions of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

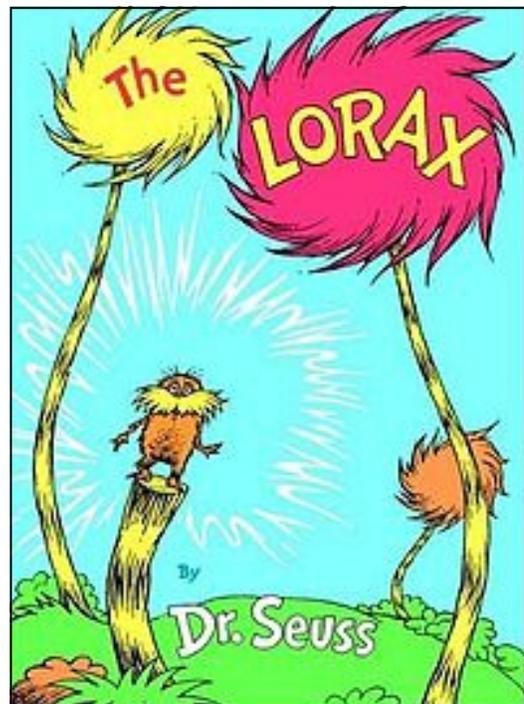
It shouldn't be just the Canadian government speaking for endangered species; it should be all of us. As fellow travelers on a finite planet it is our obligation to keep, as the ecologist Aldo Leopold admonished us, "all the pieces".

Dr. Seuss provides some essential advice in *The Lorax* that we might apply to endangered species:

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing's going to get better. It's not."

Who speaks for endangered species? We all should!

January, 2014



Interview with a Biologist:

Dr. Evie Merrill

Where did I go to school? I grew up in an asphalt jungle – New York City to be exact. I went to a small liberal arts college, St. Lawrence University, in upstate New York after spending a year traveling to Europe and the Far East. I majored in political science because the approach was how cultural systems evolved into political systems. My traveling had peaked my interest in other cultures. My senior year I took an ecology course and it's all history since then- I was hooked. Without a science degree I had a hard time getting into an MSc degree program. I happened to cross paths with a Professor at the University of Idaho who was looking for a non-traditional student, which I learned I certainly was--no science and the first women admitted to their Wildlife MSc program. After working for agencies for a while, I couldn't resist a PhD program on elk recolonizing the Mount St. Helens blast zone so I headed to the University of Washington in Seattle, WA.

Career: After finishing my MSc I worked for the Bureau of Land Management in Idaho; then I got a job with Idaho Fish and Game in research for 3 years until I left for Mount St. Helens. After completing my PhD, I took a 1-year position at the University of Wyoming, but stayed there eight years. It was there I met my current husband. Our first date was elk bugling and the second was sage grouse hunting. I thought I was in love until he took me duck hunting on pond with no cover! I thought he was nuts.

Unfortunately dual professional careers were not common and it was challenging to get a full-time position, especially in the same department as my husband so I settled for half-time. Working full time but making no head way on

full pay, we started looking around. We made one stop at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Wisconsin. Wisconsin had a rich history in wildlife management, I had professional roots back to Aldo Leopold, and the ecosystems were much more diverse than in the west so it was great learning experience. How did elk live without the green-up wave of the mountains in summer baffled me...for a while. Although my hus-



band's job was an advancement, mine was still half time, again in the same University department. Maybe it was a good thing because my son's hockey schedule just about killed me. We sorely missed the mountains, but finding two positions in the same place took another 5 years. We took 2 good jobs at the University of Alberta in 1999, and there is not a day that goes by we aren't appreciative.

Highlights of career

There have been so many. To list a few: The first time I hiked across the continental divide of the Rockies in Glacier National Park

*"Find your passion—
it will help you believe in yourself no matter what the obstacles..."*

Interview continued . . .

(USA) on my bear study; the day the carburetor on the Supercub unfroze while in a nose dive during an aerial telemetry flight. The day they named a slough after me in Idaho for getting 3 trucks stuck in it. The day I took students from a field course (they had slaved away helping me on very ugly vegetation plots during my PhD) to Mount Rainer at the peak of the wild flowers – and they knew all the Latin names! My first introduction to the Ya Ha Tinda near Banff and my first touch of wolf pup were special days, perhaps second only to the day my first PhD student graduated. Then there was the recognition by my students with a Teaching Award, The Wildlife Society as a Wildlife Fellow, and finally, fitting 18 graduate students in my hot tub—a record that remains unbroken.

Biggest changes. First, is the number of women in the wildlife field. When I started there were few, especially working on large mammals. Today there are many with PhDs, but they still seem to fall out at the higher levels. Second, the advances in technology make my head swim. Moving from computers punch cards to PCs, to multiple forms of remote sensing that include major changes in the devices on animals, to the information highway of emails, internet, and digital publishing. These changes are both for the good and the bad.

Challenges. Continuing to believe in what you think is right and keeping up with it even the face of political push back; sorting through the information overload to see the quality items; pick-

ing your battles; not losing touch with important things during the rush of everyday life and work.

Rewards: Getting to know my students and seeing them take the torch.

Advice to students. Find your passion – it will help you believe in yourself no matter what the obstacles; take opportunities and have no fear of flying; work hard but play smart; think positively and outside the box; and respect others. These will go a long way in advocating for yourself.

Mentors. I greatly respect the early women in the wildlife field. The ways they paved for me and what I learned in seeing how they persevered without compromising their own values inspired me. But most of my mentors were men. To them I am grateful for believing in me.

Favorite places in Alberta

The Ya Ha Tinda, near Sundre
Our trapline cabin near Nordegg



Species at Risk News

- ◆ Peregrine falcons nesting along the Pembina River for the first time in 50 years!
- ◆ Trumpeter swans downlisted from *Threatened* to *Species of Special Concern*
- ◆ Four new species listed as *Threatened*: western grebe, bull trout, Athabasca Rainbow trout, and pygmy whitefish
- ◆ New Alberta Species at Risk Guide

Visit : <http://esrd.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife>

Canadian Section Update

Canadian Section Representative's Report

Art Rodgers, Ontario Ministry
of Natural Resources
art.rodgers@ontario.ca



Once again it is my great pleasure to inform you that two Canadians have been selected to participate in this year's TWS Leadership Institute. Congratulations to Erin McCance (Project Manager/Wildlife Biologist, Joro Consultants, Manitoba) and Sonja Leverkus (Doctoral Candidate, Oklahoma State University and Ecosystem Scientist, Shifting Mosaics Consulting, British Columbia). The Leadership Institute, established in 2006, provides promising early-career wildlife professionals with the management, mentoring, and organizational skills they need to become successful leaders. As stated by TWS Executive Director Ken Williams, "The Leadership Institute prepares our future leaders to develop the innovative and cooperative leadership skills they need to lead the wildlife profession through the 21st century." We look forward to hearing from Erin and Sonja about their experiences and know that they will represent us well both now and as future leaders in the wildlife profession.

I am also pleased to tell you that two Canadians will be recipients of prestigious TWS Awards; the Jim McDonough Award and the Distinguished Service Award. Both of these awards recognize outstanding service to TWS and the wildlife profession over many years. Rather than tell you who they are, why don't you consider attending the TWS Annual Conference to find out who they are and congratulate them in person. registration for The Wildlife Society 21st Annual Conference is now open through various options on the new conference website (<http://wildlifesociety.org/register-2/>). The conference is taking place October 25-30 at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Register before August 31st and you will save \$50 off a full registration. Students should also start looking into the availability of travel grants for TWS student members presenting a technical paper or poster at the Society's Annual Conference from both the Canadian Section (http://wildlife.org/Canada/student_travel) and the parent society (<http://wildlifesociety.org/student-travel-grants/>). Several TWS Working Groups (e.g., Biometrics, Spatial Ecology and Telemetry, Student Development) also provide travel assistance to students attending the Annual Conference. Deadlines for many of these travel awards are coming up soon, so don't delay. Hope to see you in Pittsburgh!

Activities at TWS headquarters and undertaken by Council over the last couple of months include the release of a new 5-year strategic plan that you can access at <http://news.wildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/TWS-Strategic-Plan-5-14-2014.pdf>. The key to implementing the plan is through improvements in all aspects of TWS communications. To that end, as indicated above, the conference website has been redesigned and the main TWS website is currently being remodeled "to be more dynamic, attractive, and intuitive for use by TWS members and the public at large", according to TWS Executive Director Ken Williams. The new website will be launched in August – watch for it! TWS' electronic newsletters, *The Wildlifer* and *Wildlife Policy News*, are also being revamped to make them more attractive, informative, and useful to readers. In addition, social media outlets through Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn will be upgraded to encourage greater communication among members, partners and the public. Of course all of these changes are intended to improve membership services, so please let us know if you have any comments or suggestions.

On top of all the work involved in transforming all of these communications services, TWS staff are making preparations for the annual conference and most members of Council are working with various ad hoc committees to wrap up their reports for the fall Council meeting in Pittsburgh while juggling their "day jobs" to get out of the office and do some field work. Hope you have had a fantastic summer!

Video Games and Biology

Mike Kelly

Reading back in volume 24, issue 3 of the ATCWS newsletter, I found an article written by Shevenell Webb titled "The Future Wildlife Professional." In it she lists a number of qualifications employers are looking for in this new era of wildlife work. This was only one year ago, but if she were writing it today, she may have added 'proficient video-gamer' to the list.

Working as a summer student for Alberta Fish and Wildlife, under the supervision of species at risk biologist Lisa Wilkinson, has provided me with a number of unique opportunities. Recently, I was able to accompany Gavin Berg and Cindy Kemper (also with Alberta Fish and Wildlife) on a western grebe survey using a different approach from traditional methods. With a reduction in production costs, "drones" have reached the civilian market in recent years and are now being tested by Alberta Fish and Wildlife as a new survey tool. They have also become more user-friendly and are easier to pilot than ever before. However, this doesn't mean that one can simply pick up the controls and send the drone off. It was clear that there was a considerable amount of skill and practice involved on the part of the biologists piloting the unit. The amount of time it takes to learn these new tools will largely depend on the individual's hand-eye coordination. In other words, video-gamers will likely have an edge.

The potential application of this technology in the field of wildlife biology will only be restricted by the particular unit's limitations and the creativity of its master. Money plays an important role here. It stands to reason that the more expensive drones will have greater capabilities and consequently, a broader range of applications. The drones used by the United States military have a price tag of approximately \$4 million. Those available on the civilian market have a wide range of prices and generally start just below \$1000 and go up from there.

For example, the unit that I was fortunate enough to witness in use was valued at approximately \$1000. This included the

drone (dji phantom quadcopter) and a GoPro camera. The grebe colonies were located in two shallow reed islands in Isle Lake that would make non-aerial methods of survey difficult. The drone was able to be piloted across the reed beds until the entire area was surveyed. However, it wasn't exactly as

simple as it might sound; there were a few nervous moments when it seemed that the drone was doomed to meet its end in the water below. A light breeze coupled with a battery that allowed for only eight minutes of flight time made it challenging to bring the quadcopter back to the boat before all power was lost. At one point, I caught it just before it hit the water and took a few lashes from the propeller in the process. By the end of flying, the propellers were stained green from the times that it

almost dipped down into the reeds and trimmed a few reed tops in the process. It was clear that it wasn't as simple as launching the drone and flying the transects. It required in-the-moment planning to determine the best route that would use the wind rather than work against it. It also required the use of a skilled boat captain to move the boat into the correct positions for launching and landing.

At this price point, it is clear that the applications are limited to only a few uses; however, that same \$1000 can purchase a similar unit today that has the ability to program flight routes with a built in GPS, offers live viewing and the ability to change camera angles through the use of a smartphone, and now claims to have 25 minutes of flight time. It is reasonable to expect that as the years pass, more and better features will be available at an affordable price point. As it does, the possibilities will continue to expand. This could mean that drones will be a common tool in the future of wildlife biology.



Conservation Committee Update



By
Ken Crutchfield

The focus for this issue is the ACTWS response to the new AESRD Wetland Policy:

Honourable Dave Hancock
Premier of Alberta,
Office of the Premier
Executive Branch
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dated: July 15th, 2014

Re: AESRD Wetlands Policy

Dear Premier Hancock,

I am writing on behalf of the **Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society**, a 250 member organization representing private, academic and government wildlife professionals in the province, to voice concern about the direction the government of Alberta is moving on the *Alberta Wetland Policy (AWP): A Shift in Values*. First, however, we would like to compliment you on moving towards a wetland policy. This is an important, valuable and essential piece of legislature to protect our wetlands.

The goals and outcomes of AWP are positive, as is the overall direction to avoid and minimize impacts to wetlands, and replace impacted wetlands as a last resort. However, there are several issues that cause the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society concern. These are: a lack of clarity around rules related to “avoid, minimize and replace”; the value system for replacement; replacement ratios; the move away from an area-based system and the compensation options.

1. Without clear, simple rules about what type of wetlands must be avoided by development and in what types of situations “minimize” applies, the likelihood of resorting to the lowest common denominator of “replace” would be very strong. Without clear rules the system would be ad hoc and could lead to undesirable outcomes. The policy implementation needs assurance that avoidance and minimization always are the first choices of development.
2. The attributed value system for replacement indicates the potential for human use to be rated above other values such as biodiversity, carbon sequestration, etc. Value systems are extremely difficult to assess. Is it more important to have recreation areas for Albertans than to mitigate climate change? Is biodiversity more important to human well-being than economics? The complexities of these types of questions lead us to suggest that a more conservative risk

reduction strategy, such as no net loss, might be a better approach. This is the precautionary principle and it has substantial merit in this matter.

3. Suggested replacement ratios of up to 1:8 for 'lower valued' abundant wetlands are extremely risky. For example, estimated existing oil sands development alone could impact 460,000 ha of peatlands (bogs and fens). Present oil sands mining closure plans show a very high degree of replacement of wetlands with upland habitats. Peatlands are currently abundant throughout the boreal forest but, under full oil sands development scenarios, could become scarce in certain areas. Restoration of peatlands is very difficult and extremely costly. Peatlands sequester carbon but when drained they release carbon. The policy would potentially allow proponents to reduce large tracts of abundant peatlands by 87.5% (1/8th) in the boreal. This large reduction in peatlands is unacceptable.

4. The AWP suggests wetland replacement could occur elsewhere in the Province i.e., from green zone to white zone. A move away from an area-based to a value-based system has some merit. However, that transition comes with the risk of failing to compensate appropriately. The characteristics of Alberta's ecological zones have evolved over millennia. Transformation of these could again have far-reaching and undesirable outcomes.

The AWP allows compensation options that fund education and research. Given the critical role that wetlands play on our landscapes, we suggest compensation should be restricted to restoration and securement of threatened wetlands. Education and research need to be funded from other sources and not at the cost of wetland replacement.

The AWP needs to be more than a mechanism to allow development to occur unhindered. A provincial policy on wetlands requires balancing of development with protection of ecosystem services. We strongly urge you and your government to consider the points above in the drafting of the implementation details for The Wetland Policy. It is critical to recognize the ecological value of our wetlands and the need to preserve the integrity of and the environmental goods and services they provide.

Yours truly



Kashif M. Sheikh Ph.D., P.Biol,
President,
Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society

Do you know of any conservation issues that might be relevant to the ACTWS? Let us know.

Wildlife Regulations Renewal

This is a summary of the Wildlife Regulations renewal process and the scope of the changes.

Wildlife Regulation

- Current Alberta *Wildlife Regulation* developed in 1997
- Supports the Alberta *Wildlife Act* in regulating use of Alberta's wildlife resources
- Amended annually to reflect evolving needs of ESRD and stakeholders
- Expires **30 June 2015**
- Defines and categorizes "Wildlife"
- Establishes Wildlife Sanctuaries and Wildlife Management Units
- Establishes restrictions on hunting and trapping practices
- Establishes certain permits and licences
- Delegates certain powers duties and functions to ACA and APOS
- Opportunity for comprehensive review in 2014
- Diversity of Stakeholders affected (35+)
- Targeted consultation
- Two phases – Internal (GOA) and External (Stakeholders)

Phase I – Internal GOA

- Summer 2014
- Practitioners in ESRD, JSG, TPR and ARD
- Understanding of issues with current regulations and exploration of solutions
- Scope out necessary revisions
- Develop discussion document/guide for Phase II in consultation with third party facilitator

Phase II – External Stakeholders

- Fall/Winter 2014
- Targeted stakeholder consultation
- Third party facilitator
- Review required revisions and solicit perspective on stakeholder issues and recommended solutions

Wildlife Regulations continued....

Wildlife Regulation Renewal

- Winter/Spring 2014/15
- Compilation of revisions into new *Wildlife Regulation*, replacing expired AR143/97

In Scope

- Licenses, open seasons, allowable practices for hunting and trapping, protection of endangered organisms
- Possession of wildlife and wildlife parts
- Landowner compensation programs
- Permitting for import, export, possession and sale of wildlife
- Commercial activities related to wildlife (e.g.. Fur harvesting and allocation of wildlife to outfitter/guide industry)
- Establishment of wildlife sanctuaries and wildlife management units
- Administrative changes (e.g.. construction of regulation changes, updates to taxonomy)

Out of Scope

- Proposed changes that would require opening and amending the *Wildlife Act*
- Routine changes to hunting and trapping regulations (annual process still applies)
- Provisions which allow for proper administration of the regulation
- Amending the list of endangered organisms
- Delegation of powers, duties and functions to Delegated Administrative Organizations
- Submission of records and completion of reports
- Definition of the powers, duties, and functions of the Minister and other department officials
- Zoos (better addressed through other processes)

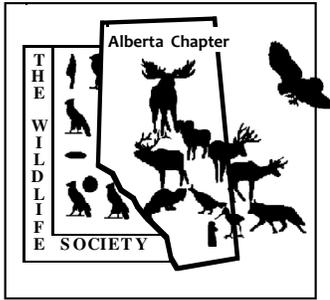
Mystery Photo

Name the species.

Why has it been in the Alberta news recently?



Photo: Dave Prescott



Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society

The Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society
P.O. Box 4990
Edmonton, AB T6E 5G8

President

Kashif Sheikh

Newsletter Editors

Lisa Wilkinson— lisa.wilkinson@gov.ab.ca

Dave Hobson— dave.hobson@gov.ab.ca



<http://joomla.wildlife.org/Alberta/>



Don't forget we are also
on Facebook

Upcoming Events

The Wildlife Society Annual Conference

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Oct 25-30, 2014

<http://wildlifesociety.org/>

Canadian Herpetological Society Conference

University of Calgary. Sept 12-15, 2014

<http://www.carcnet.ca>

The ICWERC 2016: International Conference on Wildlife Ecology, Rehabilitation and Conservation

Toronto. June 13-14, 2016

<http://www.waset.org/conference/2016/06/Toronto/ICWERC/author>

Do you know of an event that should be advertised here?

If so, contact one of the editors.

Footnotes from the Editor



*I issue a **challenge** : participate in an act of environmental out-reach this fall. Write an article for a newspaper or newsletter, give a talk at a school or public venue, make a post on social media.....get creative and reach out. Remember Lorne Fitch's words in the article on page 2: "Who speaks for endangered species? We all should!"*

Mystery photo:

Western Grebe.

Recently listed as 'Threatened' in Alberta.