

William David Wishart (1932-2026): A Tribute to a Lasting Legacy

Alberta and Canada lost a pioneer of wildlife management. William D. “Bill” Wishart (born April 3, 1932, died Sept. 17, 2026) was a Métis wildlife biologist, researcher, and conservationist who was instrumental in establishing modern, science-based wildlife management in Alberta and elsewhere in western North America. His career combined long-term field research with practical innovations in hunting regulation, wildlife population assessment, disease control, and habitat management. Bill was a native-born Albertan with the wisdom and wit of a country up-bringing, expanded tremendously by many years in public service dedicated to the conservation and management of wildlife.

He had a wealth of knowledge about a wide range of wildlife species and enough opinions to make it seem like he had been around for a hundred years (which he almost achieved in reality). His career spanned generations of wildlife and wildlife managers. Bill was instrumental in nearly every aspect of the profession, particularly in the formative years that followed Leopold and the subsequent emergence of wildlife science. Although he “retired” in 1987, Bill continued to share his wisdom, especially on the changes he had observed over time in Alberta to provide younger folks a perspective on shifting benchmarks. His strength was a willingness to provide ‘intellectual voluntarism’. Generally, this translated into mentoring (and heckling) students, current employees of various wildlife agencies, and former colleagues, yet sharing his wisdom at the same time. His favorite topics included white-tailed deer and bighorn sheep, though he readily discussed geese, grouse or just about any wildlife topic.

During his career, Bill was an Adjunct Professor with the Biological Sciences Department at the University of Alberta, a member of Alberta’s Endangered Species Scientific Subcommittee, and reviewer and advisor to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Wild Sheep Foundation. Unofficially, in his later years he was an Emeritus Wildlife Biologist with Alberta Fish and Wildlife, the grandfather of wildlife management in the province, and an ambassador for all things wild that live in Alberta.

His remarkable accomplishments include: helping Dr. Lloyd Keith reveal the 10-year population cycle of snowshoe hare (1957), establishing the Camp Wainwright deer hunt (1961) and check station (1967), setting up the Ram Mountain bighorn sheep study (1971), the Sheep River bighorn sheep study (1981), modernizing the ring-necked pheasant release program (1960s), establishing ongoing sharp-tailed grouse counts at Camp Wainwright (1970s), reestablishing Canada goose populations from mid-20th Century lows (1960s/70s), and guiding these programs to their current form and effect on wildlife management.

Bill’s life-long study, observations and contributions toward the conservation and management of bighorn sheep placed him in an elite group of internationally recognized scientists. He was a founding member of the Northern Wild Sheep and Goat Council, an organization of wildlife researchers, managers and students throughout western North America who collectively update and discuss research, issues, and solutions for the improved management of bighorn sheep and mountain goats. Within this group, Bill was considered the “father of bighorn sheep management” – an unofficial title he will continue to hold long after his passing.

Among his many accomplishments, Bill defined and directed bighorn policy, programs, and research, the application of which sustained Alberta’s bighorn population for five decades while many other jurisdictions in North America suffered severe declines. Albertan to the core, one key contribution that Bill was particularly proud of – he investigated the origins of the type specimen of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep and proposed a correction. He determined that the type specimen described in 1804 came from an area along

the Bow River east of Exshaw, Alberta.

Bill's contributions to wildlife management were not limited to bighorn sheep. As Head of Wildlife Research for the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, he was the catalyst for graduate student programs on a multitude of other species including migratory birds, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, skunks, moose, caribou, and mountain goats. It can be said that Bill's influence on wildlife research and management touched every corner of Alberta and much of the province's biodiversity.

One of Bill's substantial accomplishments was the restoration of the Canada goose population to astounding levels, much to the chagrin of many golfers who had to maneuver around their prolific and greasy leavings. He was reluctant in later years to acknowledge his role in this, especially when he was on the golf course.

Bill was an excellent mentor to students and staff who continued on to careers in wildlife management, consulting, and academia throughout Alberta and beyond. For quite a few years, he also was the conduit for funneling government grant monies to the University of Alberta to support students working on wildlife research. His leadership and guidance enabled several generations of biologists and educators to follow in his footsteps and conserve Alberta's wildlife legacy for future generations. He is fondly remembered for his unwavering support, encouragement, advice, and humour. Bill was especially supportive of women entering wildlife biology at a time when the profession was predominantly male. Moreover, he had a knack of communicating principles of wildlife management and environmental protection to any audience in unique ways. His efforts in public education and outreach on environmental issues were exemplary and fulfilled a very necessary function.

His honors were many and included one of the first wildlife biologist recipients of the Canadian Silver Jubilee Medal Conservation Award (1977), the William Rowan Distinguished Service Award from the Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (1993), the Government of Alberta's Order of the Bighorn (2000), the Northern Wild Sheep & Goat Council Appreciation Award in Kamloops, B.C. (2012), the Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society's Ian McTaggart-Cowan Lifetime Achievement Award (2024), and the Alberta Emerald Award for Lifetime Achievement (2024). Bill was a Certified Wildlife Biologist of The Wildlife Society and a founding member of the Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (1989). In recognition of his mentorship and emphasis on prioritizing student training and their activities, the Alberta Chapter of TWS renamed their post-graduate scholarship as the William (Bill) Wishart Post Graduate Student Scholarship in 2012 (when he was 80 yrs young, and still going strong). Bill was present to shake the hand of nearly every Wishart Scholarship recipient to date.

Early Life and Education

Bill identified as Métis and was a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. His paternal ancestry includes Cree and Assiniboine forebears, while his maternal ancestry is English. Under his father's influence, he developed an early interest in wildlife and learned to hunt, fish and trap around Carstairs, AB. As a teenager, he operated a trapline, gaining practical knowledge of animal behaviour and habitat that later informed his scientific work. In 1952, he moved to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta, where William Rowan and other leading Alberta scientists influenced his development. Bill received a BSc with honors in 1956 and was the first graduate of the University of Alberta's newly established conservation-biology program. He completed an MSc in 1958 under Dr. R. B. Miller. His thesis, *The Bighorn Sheep of the Sheep River Valley*, was the first systematic study of bighorn sheep ecology, population structure, and management in Alberta, and it set the stage for his illustrious relationship with the species throughout his life. Bill was one of the first crop of professionally trained biologists hired to work in Alberta (he was hired by the

Govt of Alberta in 1958). While not widely known, Bill holds the distinction of being the first Indigenous person to earn a graduate degree in Canada. He was also the first Indigenous person to graduate from the University of Alberta.

Personal Life

Bill was married to Patricia Low (1931-2024), a teacher, author and conservationist from Hillcrest, Alberta. They had three children: David S. Wishart, a professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton; Ian M. Wishart, an emergency physician in Calgary; and Alexandra (Sandy) J. Wishart, a retired provincial parks manager in Canmore. In typical Bill style his obituary opens with “Bill Wishart has died, golf clubs for sale”. Also included in his obituary is “in lieu of flowers please consider donating to the William “Bill” Wishart Postgraduate Student Award fund of the Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (<https://www.actws.ca>).

Bill Wishart was an exceptional individual whose lifetime achievements advanced wildlife management to the benefit of all Canadians. Moreover, his personal touch, mentorship, and ready-wit brought entertainment and enthusiasm to every individual or group he had the opportunity to interact with. **In the pursuit of wildlife management, we are often so intent on staring into the fog called tomorrow, we rarely turn around and look back at the pathway called yesterday stretching behind us. How we got on that pathway, how we gained confidence, momentum, and critical mass is mostly based on those who came before us.**

**All of us stand on the shoulders of some giants—Bill Wishart was one of those giants.
Several generations of biologists stand on his shoulders.**

Acknowledgements

We're grateful to Bill's son, David Wishart, who lovingly compiled his father's autobiography, which Bill himself had the opportunity to review before his passing. Close friends and colleagues, including Margo Pybus, Lorne Fitch, Marco Festa-Bianchet, Jon Jorgenson, and Kirby Smith, also contributed their memories and reflections, helping to create a wonderful tribute that celebrates Bill's life, accomplishments, and lasting impact on Alberta's wildlife community.



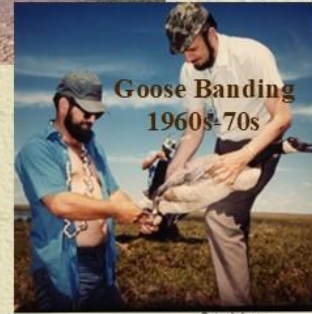
**10 Yr SSH cycle
1950s**



**Goose nesting @
Bills office**



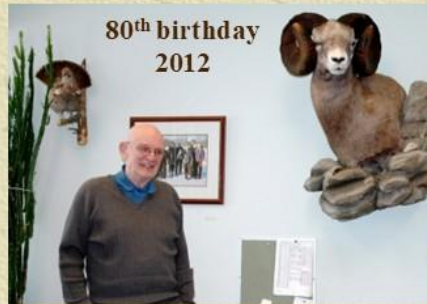
**Pheasant Release
1960s-70s**



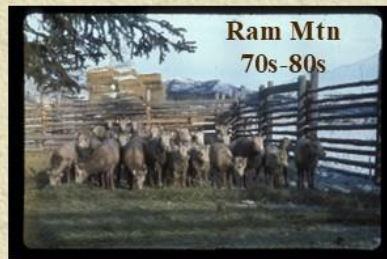
**Goose Banding
1960s-70s**



**Early Gov't wildlifera
1950s**



**80th birthday
2012**



**Ram Mtn
70s-80s**



**Camp
Wainwright
60s-80s**