

A Trip Down Memory Lane

CANADIAN WILDLIFERS REVISIT OLD STOMPING GROUNDS

By Herb Goulden, Brian Gillespie, and Larry Bidlake



Credit: Laurel Goulden-James

Herb Goulden, CWB, worked as a biologist for Manitoba Conservation from 1963 to 1998 and for the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation from 1998 to 2010.

It was a plan we had been discussing for several years. Then, beginning last year, our group of retired wildlife managers finally put aside retirement activities to take “a trip down memory lane.” The three of us had spent much of our 30-plus-year careers with Manitoba’s wildlife and resource management departments, working to secure and develop Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) to benefit wildlife. We thought it would be fun to have a visit and tour some of our old haunts, so we hit the road. Touring some of the WMAs that we had a hand in securing, designating, and managing for wildlife conservation brought back many fond memories—and opened our eyes to some of the achievements and challenges of the WMA effort.

Being a Part of History

Manitoba’s provincial WMA program began in 1961 with legislation under the Manitoba Wildlife Act that called for establishing WMAs to provide a

“place for wildlife and people.” Lands designated as such were assembled by land acquisition, inter-departmental land-use rationalization of existing government (Crown) land, and exchanges with individuals and local governments.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the province spent \$5 million on land acquisition through cooperative agreements with the Canadian government to purchase approximately 65,000 hectares of marginal lands, many of which became WMAs. (This represents a very small part of the landscape when you consider that Manitoba has 7.6 million hectares of farmland and a vast area of boreal forest and tundra.) Considerable effort and funding were then directed towards boundary delineation, habitat development, fire protection, access improvement, and management of WMAs for both recreational and commercial uses ranging from hunting and birding to hay production and oil extraction.



Credit: Herb Goulden

During their 2013 road trip, Brian Gillespie (left) and Larry Bidlake visit the Parkland Wildlife Management Area, whose four units include wetlands, grasslands, and mature forests. The Ruska Rawa Unit, south of Riding Mountain National Park near Rossburn, provides habitat for elk, moose, black bears, grouse, and many waterbird species.

Today, Manitoba has two million hectares of land in 81 WMAs (see [interactive map](#) online). These areas range in size from as small as one-quarter section (64 hectares) to hundreds of square kilometres, providing habitat for numerous wildlife species. The Delta Marsh, Oak Hammock, and Whitewater Lake WMAs, for example, play host to large numbers of resident and migratory wetland birds including Canada geese, dabbling and diving ducks, and a wide range of shorebirds. In the far north, the Cape Churchill and Cape Tatnum WMAs are home to an abundant polar bear population.

The early WMAs were created for big game, waterfowl, and upland birds, but the program’s scope widened 15 years ago to provide a greater focus on biodiversity and non-game wildlife. For example, an endangered plant species, the Western spiderwort, is protected in the Lauder Sandhills WMA. Although in recent years fewer WMAs have been designated, the program continues to establish and develop areas for wildlife and public use. In addition, numerous groups—including the Manitoba

Habitat Heritage Corporation, Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Manitoba Wildlife Federation, provincial soil and water conservation districts, the Watchable Wildlife Program, the Manitoba Naturalists' Society, The Nature Conservancy of Canada, and the Canadian Wildlife Service—have secured substantial acreages in the southern half of the province. Though these lands are not designated as WMAs, they function in similar ways for the benefit of wildlife.

The three of us, along with other Manitoba Conservation staff, were involved in the establishment and/or the management of most of the WMAs in southwestern Manitoba. The process could be grueling. We faced tough boardroom battles to secure some of the provincially owned Crown lands from competing uses such as livestock grazing and gravel extraction, and there was a constant scramble for money to buy eroded lands that were marginal for farming but had potential for wildlife habitat development. We worked with local advocates to garner political support for WMA habitats, facing uphill struggles to convince competing users, government bureaucrats, and some politicians of the value of wildlife and the necessity for providing space for wildlife to live. Over the years, we slogged through countless hours of paperwork to make it happen.

Road Trips to Remember

After all this time, we wanted to reconnect for a visit and see how these conservation lands were doing. So, for the past two summers, armed with maps and aging memory banks, we navigated trails and roads that decades ago we had known as well as our backyards (see map). Here's the ground we covered:

Trip One, Summer 2012. For two days we travelled through the southwest corner of the province. On the first day we headed northwest of Brandon through the Villages of Rivers and Oak River nearly to the Saskatchewan border west of Miniota and the Assiniboine River. We turned south and traveled along the Saskatchewan boundary through Elkhorn and Sinclair to the Village of Pierson near the U.S. border and not far from the J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota. On the second day we visited WMAs near the Towns of Hartney, Deloraine, Boissevain, Margaret, and Brandon Hills.

Trip Two, Summer 2013. We again took two days, beginning in Brandon and covering WMAs to



Credit: Herb Goulden

the northwest between Riding Mountain National Park and Lake Manitoba. We travelled to the villages of Plumas and Langruth in the vicinity of Big Grass Marsh—the first Ducks Unlimited project in Canada. We headed north along the west shore of Lake Manitoba beyond the Village of Amaranth, then west across the southern escarpment of Riding Mountain, visiting WMAs and wildlife refuges along the way. Our homeward journey began near the Village of Rossburn.

In all, we travelled some 1,600 kilometers, averaging about 800 kilometers for each two-day trip. We lucked out with good weather both years, and the tailgate lunches tasted as good as ever. As we travelled over those back roads and trails, we relived the “old” days, swapping stories of our collective efforts of the past, of colleagues retired and passed on, and of the camaraderie we shared with other wildlife biologists, technicians, and forward-thinking agrologists with whom we had worked.

Observations and Reflections

Today, we're still sifting through the memories, impressions, and concerns that arose during our four days revisiting little islands of habitat surrounded by a sea of agriculture. Some of what we saw was heartening, almost surreal, as when we saw landscapes that had formerly been scarred from years of misuse now cloaked in permanent cover, shelterbelts, and wetlands. In those cases, we found much to affirm that the early efforts to establish WMAs had been well worth the fight.

The Bernice WMA in an area known as Poverty Plains was one such example. It is on a sandy deposit

During summer road trips in 2012 (green) and 2013 (black), the authors visited many of the Wildlife Management Areas they had helped establish or manage in southwestern Manitoba. Averaging about 800 kilometers for each of the two-day trips, the trio covered a lot of ground—and relived a lot of memories.

Co-author Affiliations

Brian Gillespie worked in several senior natural resource management positions with Manitoba Conservation from 1967 to 2011, including as Director of Wildlife.

Larry Bidlake worked as a field biologist with Manitoba Conservation from 1965 to 2001.

left by the glaciers some 10,000 years ago. The land had been cultivated in the past, but it was not very productive and eventually went back to the local government in lieu of back taxes. After it was secured as a WMA, it was replanted with trees, shrubs, and dense nesting grasses. Today, it is mostly grasslands with some significant areas of mixed-grass prairie. The

Bernice WMA protects habitat for the endangered Baird's sparrow, loggerhead shrikes, and other grassland birds that nest here in the ever-shrinking mixed-grass prairie. Other species of the area are Sprague's pipit, savannah sparrow, lark bunting, and chestnut-collared longspur.

Credit: Herb Goulden



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Misuse of off-road vehicles damaged fragile habitat within the Lauder Sandhills WMA, home to the endangered Western spiderwort and several species of woodpeckers, flycatchers, and other birds. At the Bernice WMA west of Lauder, a chestnut-collared longspur (top) hints at the area's revival from degraded cropland to lush mixed-grass prairie, a success story of the WMA movement.

Sadly, not every site we visited left a good impression. Indeed, we saw evidence that the effort and care that had gone into identifying and managing many WMAs have not been sustained. For example, some WMA signs that had once proudly identified public wildlife lands are now bent, faded, or missing altogether. In several locations, we also saw damage caused by misuse of off-road vehicles. In some spots there appears to be a problem in the control of noxious weeds such as leafy spurge, and in the encroachment of shrubs and trees on former mixed grass prairie, which is such a scarce commodity in Prairie Canada. We also saw issues with the maintenance of boundaries and access trails and roads. This was particularly evident in the Parkland WMA units.

We had to wonder what neighboring landowners must think of neglected WMAs that appear as de-

serted wastelands. Without some display of minimal maintenance on WMAs, the criticism by local landowners and the pressure to intensively graze, sell, burn, spray, or drain these lands will likely increase.

Challenges for the Future

Without advocates, Manitoba's wildlife habitat niches, which were so difficult to secure, could be lost with the stroke of a pen and sold to private interests to bolster provincial revenues. So far, to our knowledge, WMAs have escaped this fate, but it is important that there be a stewardship plan and funding in place for current wildlife managers to maintain WMA infrastructure (such as signs and access points), manage these habitats, and add to the existing inventory of lands.

Based on our conversations during our two tours of Manitoba's Wildlife Management Areas, we see that the need for natural areas that can sustain or rekindle the public's interest in nature is even more acute now than in 1961, when the legislation for WMAs was first put in place. The pressure for economic development will continue to have major impacts on the land base and on naturally occurring habitat areas unless managers, policymakers, and the public act now.

Saving places for wildlife and people should always remain a provincial goal. We can only hope that the new generation of biologists and managers have been instilled with a landscape appreciation and ethic. Our generation soaked up the teachings of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and the lessons of the landscape tragedies of the "Dirty Thirties" in Prairie Canada. We were influenced by agricultural colleagues who had a broad perspective on land use and management and recognized the place and importance of wildlife on the landscape. Today, we can only hope that the lessons of the past are not lost on current managers.

We applaud the foresight that saw the development of the WMA program and all that it has accomplished, and we feel proud and privileged to have had a role in the struggle to save these remnants of the natural landscape for future generations. Our recent sojourns have given us an opportunity to look back through the rear view mirror and forward through the windshield at the WMA program in Manitoba. What we saw gave us satisfaction, hope, and an awareness of the challenges that lie ahead. It is now time for the next generation to pick up the baton. ■