

# COLUMBIA WETLANDS STEWARDSHIP PARTNERS

MANDATE AND PROJECTS TO DATE- November 2011



The Columbia Wetlands is a large wetland and river system located in the East Kootenay portion of BC. These wetlands are one of the largest wetland complexes in Canada and on the planet, and are recognized as a wetland of international importance by the United Nations under the RAMSAR Treaty. The system stretches 150 km from Invermere in the south, to Golden in the north, along the Upper Columbia River. The system is a complex mix of federal, provincial, municipal and private lands. The wetlands and river are very important to the people that live in the communities adjacent to the wetlands.



There is major interest on the part of local NGOs and these communities in assisting federal and provincial agencies in the stewardship and management of this special wetland and river system. **The Columbia Wetlands Stewardship Partners group was formed in 2008. It is made up of over 35 groups and agencies concerned with the wetlands.** The group includes all of the local NGOs with an interest in the river and wetlands, the local First Nations, industrial representatives from the tourism and forest

sectors, representatives (councilors, mayors and regional district representatives) from each of the communities along the wetlands and all of the federal and provincial agencies with responsibilities in the wetlands,.

The mandate of the group is to steward the wetlands in accordance with our vision as a single system irrespective of ownership or jurisdiction and to take a pro-active stance in dealing with issues as they arise. **We intend to take a positive, community and science based approach to issues related to the wetlands, and resolve issues neighbor to neighbor.** The formation of this group is, in effect, local people taking responsibility for a natural landscape that they care deeply about.



## **ACTIONS TO DATE**

The Wetland Partners and its partner groups and agencies have taken on a wide range of projects to further the management and protection of the wetland system over the last three years. These include:

**1. Baillie Grohman Canal.** The wetlands partners are working with the community of Canal Flats to explore options for giving the old canal, connecting the Kootenay River and Columbia Lake, recognition and protection as a National Historic site. The site also provides a connection between the systems for riparian dependent wildlife species.

**2. Dutch Creek stream restoration proposal.** This has been a long standing concern. The Wetland Partners, working with the Columere Park Community Association and

several other groups are having professionals look at this issue so that an information based decision can be made on if and how to proceed on this project. The objective was to return Dutch Creek to its original channel in which it flowed into Columbia Lake and contributed to the health of that lake and provided spawning habitat for ling cod and other species. After some consideration by the committee responsible for this project, it was realized that this project would be prohibitively expensive, given the situation on the alluvial fan of Dutch Creek, and present day regulations around actions related to “in stream” actions. Initial investigations into the situation indicated that the required diversion would be in the order of several hundred thousand dollars. The Columbia Wetland Stewardship Partners is concerned with being fiscally responsible. The committee overseeing the project therefore decided that we should save the various funding agencies the cost of a more detailed analysis and decided not to proceed with the assessment.

**3. Fairmont Resort riparian habitat enhancement.** In the summer of 2010, the Wetland Partners used school kids and teenagers to plant 1200 cottonwood seedlings (and other deciduous species) along the reach of the Columbia River that flows through the Riverside Golf Course, working with the staff at the golf course and the Fairmont Hot Springs Resort. Support has been received from the Columbia Valley Local Conservation Fund and the Royal Bank Blue Water Fund. The objective is to restore a deciduous component to the riparian zone along the river to maintain Lewis' Woodpecker (a listed species), other riparian birds and animals and to help maintain the quality of kokanee spawning habitat in this reach.



**4. Salmon Festival.** Prior to the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State in 1947, 40 to 50 lb Spring salmon (shown in the picture below), spawned in the Upper Columbia River at Fairmont, Athalmer and other areas. The loss of this fishery had a major impact on First Nations people’s in the valley. In the fall of 2011 we are

planning a conference and celebration of both the salmon that once occurred here (so we don't forget), and the kokanee salmon (landlocked sockeye salmon) that presently occur in the system. Some 250,000 of these smaller fish will be spawning in the river at the Fairmont Resort during the conference and celebration. During the event a sculpture to commemorate the salmon was opened at an event in Athlmerre.



Photo from B. Ede collection

**5. Wilmer Slough cleanup.** The federal government has initiated a cleanup on this site, which is a National Wildlife Area. Two local photographers and film makers, Pat and Bibba Morrow, have taken the lead in planning a public cleanup day on the site to assist in this project, working with the local chapter of Wildsight, the Windermere Rod and Gun Club and the town of Invermere. The major cleanup event occurred on April 24, with 25 community members removing 150 tires and other junk from the wetlands and the slopes above. This work was supported financially by Wildsight, Friends of the Columbia Wetlands, the Windermere Rod and Gun Club, the town of Invermere and the Wetland Partners. The group will continue to work with the federal ministries responsible for the final cleanup of the site, providing an excellent example of cooperation between federal agencies and local stewardship groups.



Photo by P. Morrow.

**6. Removal of old vehicles from along the river.** The Min. of Environment Parks and Protected Areas staff removed a large number of old vehicles and other junk from along the river in the Athalmer to Edgewater reach in 2009.



**7. Radium overlook site cleanup and kiosk.** The Min. of Environment Parks and Protected Areas staff and members of the Wetland Partners cleaned up this site last year. The Partners are part of a group looking at improving this site and putting in a kiosk explaining local recreational opportunities and the importance of the wetlands.

**8. Goose Nesting Platforms in the wetlands**

The Rod and Gun Clubs established nesting platforms for geese many years ago, working with Tom Sterling and Ducks Unlimited. Many of the platforms are falling down and could be removed or replaced. We have been discussing how best to manage this issue. Canada geese are now common in the valley, are affecting agricultural operations and it was decided to allow the platforms to continue to deteriorate.

**9. Linkage Project.** The Partners, working with Parks Canada have completed a report that identifies and map linkages for aquatic species along the Columbia River, for movement north and south of terrestrial species along the east and west benches, and for east to west movement across the valley, to assist the Regional District of East Kootenay and others in their planning for the area. Next steps include planning for maintaining linkages between Kootenay National Park, the wetlands and the Purcell Range to the west.

**10. The impact of human activity on river levees and perched wetlands.**

Through most of the wetland system the river is bordered by natural levees built up over time by flood events. These levees separate the river from "perched" wetlands on the adjacent floodplain that have high wildlife and ecosystem values, especially where water levels are maintained throughout the year. In many areas these levees have been compromised by human activity (bridge building, historic changes to the levees to accommodate stern wheeler traffic). Working with the University of Alberta, the partners

have supported the activities of a Masters level student to document the degree of change in the levees and associated perched wetlands. Rather to our surprise (thus the value of good science), we found there was more change resulting from natural processes in the system than was found close to bridges and causeways across the wetlands. The final results of this work will be reported in late 2011.

**11. Northern Leopard Frog Habitat Assessment.** Leopard Frog is the one amphibian species that has disappeared from the wetland system. The Wetland Partners have supported work by Dr. Suzanne Bayley, Chris Carli and Penny Ohanian to identify potential habitat for leopard frogs. The objective is to identify those wetlands that would be the best sites for a re-introduction of leopard frogs into the system. This work was reported in early 2011. The Wetland Partners will work with the Leopard Frog Recovery Team to return leopard frogs to the system in future years.

**12. Invermere to Golden Power Line Alignment Project.** The Wetland Partners participated in the review of this project to ensure that there would be minimal impact on the wetlands. Agreement has been reached on a route for the power line will stay entirely away from the wetlands proper and cross the river at one place at Golden.

**13. Water Monitoring in the Upper Columbia watershed.** The Columbia River wetlands are directly dependent on the flows and spring freshette of the Columbia River. Ryan MacDonald of the University of Lethbridge was contracted by the CBT, on behalf of the Partners and the Wildsight Lake Windermere Project to provide an overview of climate, water flow, water quality and ground water monitoring for the Upper Columbia basin. The report provides an overview of the water supply issues faced by the wetlands and communities in the Upper Columbia Basin. We also worked with Crystal Slaughter, a GIS student at Selkirk College, who developed a Power Point that described spatially our knowledge of water flows in the Upper Columbia. For 2011-12 we have proposed a meeting of all water interests to plot a strategy for improving water monitoring and water management in the upper system.

**14. Forster Creek.** We are working with private land owners in this area to develop a locally driven Conservation Plan that will combine ecosystem restoration on their, with conservation easements in some areas and better management of the public lands around their properties.

**15. Invasive Weeds in the wetlands.** A Wildsight staff person has been working on invasive weeds, with funding support from the Wetland Partners, for three years. We now have the cooperation of CP Rail on this issue and we are making headway on dealing with this issue in the wetlands. An assessment of several sites in the wetlands found no aquatic invasive weeds in the system to date.

**16. Noxious weeds on private lands.** Several local ranchers have had problems with Poison Hemlock a local plant that is deadly for cattle. They have requested assistance in identifying these plants and making sure they do not remove other similar plants that are important foods for wildlife, including grizzly bears.

**17. Science and Adaptive Management Strategy.** Understanding the working of this very complex river, wetland and riparian system is important to the long term management of the system. In 2010 a strategy was developed that reviewed the ecological status of the system, identified all previous work in the area and reviewed the status of the entire range of species that use the system. The objective is to identify those processes and species we need to be concerned about in the future. To date, the only species lost from this system are the Northern Leopard Frog, the Columbia River Chinook Salmon and Columbia River Steelhead, both of which spawned in this area prior to 1936 and the construction of the Grand Coulee dam.

**19. A Photo Plot survey for the wetlands.** We do not have access to money to do higher level scientific monitoring in the wetlands. However, there is a valuable and cheap alternative called a photo plot survey that can be carried out by volunteers. It consists of taking photos of various habitats on an annual basis to provide a record of long term change over time. Such photos become more and more valuable over time. As part of this project we have collected and scanned historic photos of the wetlands to provide a record of habitat change over time in the wetlands. (Photos of the wetlands near Canal Flats in 1912 and 2010 are below).



**20. Art in the Wetlands.** The Wetland Partners supported a project called "Columbia Wetlands: Natural Inspiration", working with Kicking Horse Culture, an art studio in Golden and the Golden chapter of Wildsight. The exhibition was a spectacular success with exhibits from 20 artists involved. You can see the art created for the exhibition at: One of the many paintings from the exhibit is provided below.

Susan Fahrni

Edgewater, BC



**Columbia Wetlands**  
acrylic on stretched canvas | 47¾" wide x 35¾" tall

**21. Fire Fly Project.** Fire flies are a small beetle that lives in wetlands that glow in the dark during their mating ritual in June. They are a classic icon for wetland health and are part of many young people's first experiences with wetlands. There are international concerns with their fate in many areas. They occur in a few areas in the wetlands and in the East Kootenay. The Wetland Partners, working with the Royal BC Museum and local land owners have identified 25 sites at which they occur in the East Kootenay and have developed a sense of their habitat requirements. We intend to work with the land owners involved to maintain this unique species and develop opportunities for you people to see these spectacular residents in the wetlands.

**22. A federal boating regulation for the river and wetlands.** There has been a decade long debate over a boating regulation for the river system and wetlands. The group has come up with a compromise that is presently before government that would limit use of the river to boats with less than a 20HP motor. A final decision on this issue will be made by the federal government in late 2011.

**23. Parsons Bridge replacement.** The series of bridges and roadway across the river and wetlands at Parsons is being replaced over the next two years. We have been working with the BC Forest Service Engineering staff to ensure that the bridge design will accommodate major flood events and maintain natural river flows.

**24. Parson Bridge access.** We are also working with the BC Forest Service and the Columbia Shuswap Regional District to develop a proper boat launch site at the bridge after the new bridge is completed, to provide better access to the river.

**25. Horse Creek Restoration and Access.** This site has been a source of controversy for some time, around access to the river and the state of the lower portion of Horse Creek. A series of meeting was held with the local land owner and various interest groups. We have come up with a joint plan to provide access and restore riparian vegetation at the site.

**26. Nichol森 Bridge Access.** The Wetland Partners have been working with Susan Abbott of the Columbia Shuswap Regional District to develop a riverside park and access point on this site, working with a local land owner.

**27. Old Golden Log Mill Site Cleanup.** The old mill site beside the river at Golden has historic value; the area around it needs a major cleanup. The town of Golden and the Wetland Partners are planning a cleanup day in the fall of 2011.

**28. River access at Donald Bridge.** The Donald Bridge will be replaced in 2011 or 2012. The Partners and Susan Abbott of the CSRD have been working with the Min. of Highways to try to find a way to replace the unofficial river access point below the old bridge. An access point at this location is critical to allow larger boats to access the river and canyon below the bridge and as a pickup site for boaters floating down to the bridge from Golden.

**29. New Projects.** We are presently developing ideas around a guide to the wetlands and best management practices strategies for some of the industrial users with an interest in the wetlands.

**The Wetland Partners have been able to accomplish a great deal over the last few years, using volunteer efforts and relatively minor funding.** We would like to thank those that have provided funding including Parks Canada and the federal government, the BC Ministry of Environment and The Columbia Basin Trust. Other funding agencies have also helped to fund specific projects.

**Participants in the Columbia Wetlands Stewardship Partners Group  
Nov. 2011**

**Federal Government**

**Office of Boating Safety, Department of Transport** – Tim McCann  
**National Parks** - Derek Peterson  
**Canadian Wildlife Service** – Blair Hammond

**Provincial Government**

**Habitat Protection, Min. of Environment** - Peter Holmes  
**Conservation Officer Service, Min. Of Environment** -Adam Christie

**Columbia Basin Trust**

**Environmental Program Manager** - Kindy Godsall

**Municipalities**

**Councillor, town of Golden** – Cabel Moss  
**Councillor, town of Canal Flats** – Ute Juras  
**Councillor, town of Invermere** - Bob Campsal  
**Councillor, town of Radium Hot Springs** – Clairia Reinhardt

**Regional Districts**

**Reg. District of East Kootenay, Rural Area G Representative** - Gerry Wilke  
**Reg. District of East Kootenay, Rural Area F Representative** – Wendy Booth  
**Columbia Shuswap Reg. District, Rural Area A Representative** - Ron Oszust  
**Columbia Shuswap Reg. District, Parks Planner** – Susan Abbott  
**Reg. District of East Kootenay, Planner** – Andrew MacLeod

**First Nations**

**Columbia River Intertribal Fisheries Commission** - Jim Claircoates  
**Shuswap Indian Band** – Mark Thomas

**NGOs**

**Wildsight, Golden** - Ellen Zimmerman  
**Wildsight, Invermere** - Ron Clarke  
**Friends of the Col. Wetlands** - Nola Alt  
**Golden Rod and Gun Club** - Grant Arlt  
**Golden Non-mechanized Recreational Users** - Maryann Emery  
**Columbia Rivers Greenways Alliance** – Klara Threscher  
**Canal Flats Rod and Gun Club** - Dave White  
**Windermere Rod and Gun Club** - Buzz Harmsworth  
**East Kootenay Conservation Partnership** – David Hillary  
**Intermountain Joint Venture** - Larry Halverson  
**Residents of the Upper Columbia River** - Garry Habart  
**Brisco Recreation Society** – Don Wolfendin  
**Lake Windermere Ambassadors** - Taoya Schaefer

**Industry**

**BC Trappers Association** - Nolan Rad  
**Southern Guides and Outfitters** – Doug Goodwin  
**Windermere Farmer's Institute** – Paul Galbraith  
**TEMBEC (forest company)** - Paul Fresca  
**Tourism and Heritage Golden** - Irv Graham

**Researchers**

**Wetland Researcher, University of Alberta** – Dr. Suzanne Bayley