Ranchlands Preserve Report Summer 2016

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Introduction:

People drive by this one area all the time, throw a curious look in the direction of it but seeing the sign of no trespassing that they don't give it much further thought. If only they knew that they were getting a small glimpse of was a Treasure that has been hidden in plain sight in the City of Medicine Hat.

This treasure is the Ranchlands Reserve. Why would it be a treasure with many hidden gems within it? Well read on and I can bet by the end of this you would be agreeing with me.

One of the first things that one will see when they drive up to this protected area is the big signs of no trespassing, Environmentally Sensitive Area, because of an endangered species of plant that is called the Tiny Cryptantha. But once you look past that sign you will see there is much more.

Entering the gates you are welcomed by an expanse of beautiful native prairie. Here is a prairie with so many plants dancing in the warm breeze to the music of all the animals and bugs.

Photo Credit John Slater

As you stroll through this area, there is always a special surprise of such things as a rattlesnake or baby birds. This prairie doesn't seem to run out of interesting things to show you with every walk you take through the grasses.

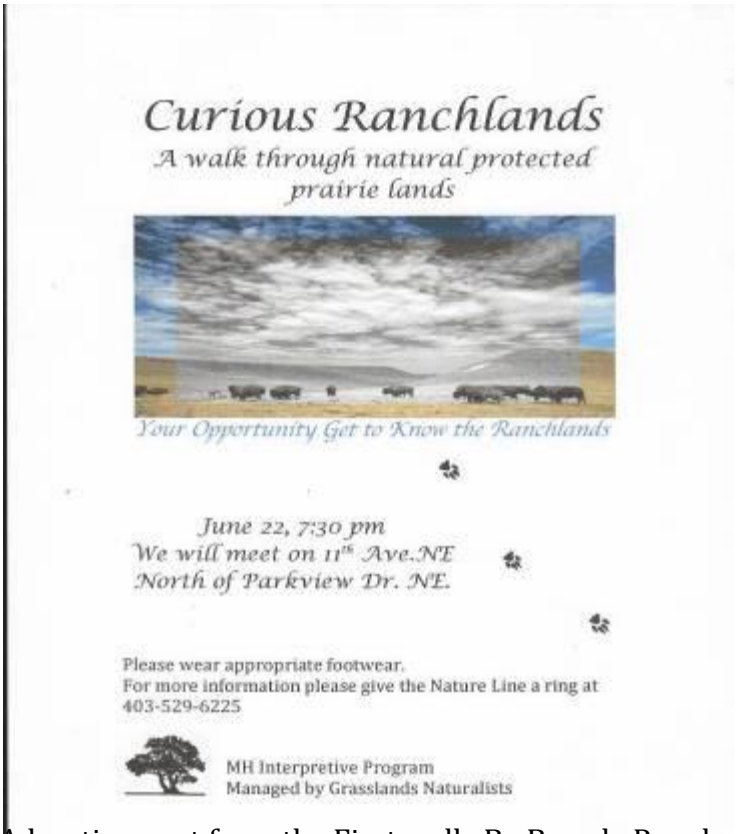
Programs

Public and special group programs were held through the summer to introduce people to this special area.

Public Walks

I was lucky to experience many surprises during the walks I led. Each of the three public events over the summer had a different theme.

1. The first walk was an introduction to the area. The theme was called, "Curious Ranchlands". On this walk before unlocking the gate, I did an introduction to the area, welcoming everyone to Medicine Hat's secret little slice of heaven. Then I led them down the middle of the ranchlands and around back up talking about the many species of animals and plants that we had there. We spotted tracks which may have belonged to a cougar!



Poster Advertisement from the First walk, By Brenda Powder

Photo Credit John Slater

2. The second walk was called 'Not Just a Pretty Face'. This walk was about the plants that could be found in this area and the many uses they have had through out the centuries in Canada and in other countries.

Here is the beginning of the talk that I did for this event;

> *"Welcome to our second walk through the prairie ranchlands protected area.*
> *First off, we will talk about safety concerns and precautions. Remember that what we share throughout the walk is not being recommended for your own personal use. We will not be accountable for what you choose to do on your own decisions and time. It is recommended that you do your own research and never ever take anything from nature that you are not 100% sure about, because you can get very sick or even die.*
>
> *There are many plants that we use that have poisonous look-a-like relatives that look almost identical, and also some plants can be poisonous if picked at the wrong time or used incorrectly. So please be cautioned.*
>
> *All right, since we have now all the papers signed and the warnings have been talked about and agreed upon, I will explain a little about our walk this evening.*
>
> *We are going to be going on a Traditional use walk. The walk name, 'Not Just A Pretty Face', was picked because the plants and flowers and shrubs that we admire are not just a pretty face, they have many uses for such things as cosmetics, medicine, health and tools, and have been used for thousands of years. There are scientists that are testing the different types of plants that people have used for a variety of different things and they are finding that there is a lot of truth to what they are used for. For example a plant that was used for pain for many years has been found to have the same compounds as say in aspirin…*"

During the walk, various plants that we walked past had many uses for them. The people who participated in this walk had more information to add to the different uses for a number of the plants on this walk.

The 'Not Just a Pretty Face' event was very well received by the public, ages ranging from 7 years old to those in their late 60s. Many stated that they

would like to attend more walks in the future and how beautiful it was in this Preserve.

3. The third walk was called, 'A Stroll into the Past'. On this walk I had talked about how the prairie would have been around 3000 years ago. I described the sights; sounds and what would have been seen. Buffalo would have been roaming in herds of thousands, and there would be sounds of laughter from the First Nations people who had traveled through here and the smell of smoke in the air from food being cooked or hides being prepared. I mentioned some traditional teachings of the First Nations throughout the event. Such as the seven teachings: love, respect, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility, and truth that the First Nations try to live by each day, including in today's time.

I then lead the group to treasures that not many know of; there are the over 3000 year old archeological sites of teepee circles and monuments that were left there by First Nations people from thousands of years ago.

The following are pieces of things that I had talked about during the event:

> *"…….We are going to be going for a stroll into the past today. During this walk try and think of how it might have been thousands of years ago. What animals would you see, what would the landscape look like and what type of people were here? ……. ……..There are many plants and animals in many types of ecosystem such as the wetlands that we got to see, but one is not less important then the other. Just like with people via one of the traditional teachings, not one person is better than the other, nor deems less important.*
> *If one animal or plant is completely wiped out then it has a ripple effect throughout the whole world not just the ecosystem that it was part of. We need to be cautious and each do our part …even if you think it is a minor step it's actually a huge things in comparison with the world…….Thank you to all of you for coming out here this evening , in doing that you have made a huge contribution in protecting our ecosystems…."*

Kids Super Hero Events

I also took some day camp groups up there. I created a program called the 'Super Hero Program'. This program was free of charge because in exchange for interpretive programming about the history and the health of the preserve prairie, the youth would then be inspired to be super heroes and help by removing invasive species.

On one of the walks, we came across almost juvenile birds. The youth were able to see up close how beautiful nature is, and it was a double great experience for this particular group of kids because they were actually from different countries.

The following picture is one of the Super Hero Program groups. The youth had happily picked over 700 Baby's Breath plants that day.

Photo Credit John Slater

One child from another group had asked what careers would there be that would allow her to work with plants. That walk which lasted just over an hour was fuel to feed this little girl's passion to learn more about the plants of ecosystems.

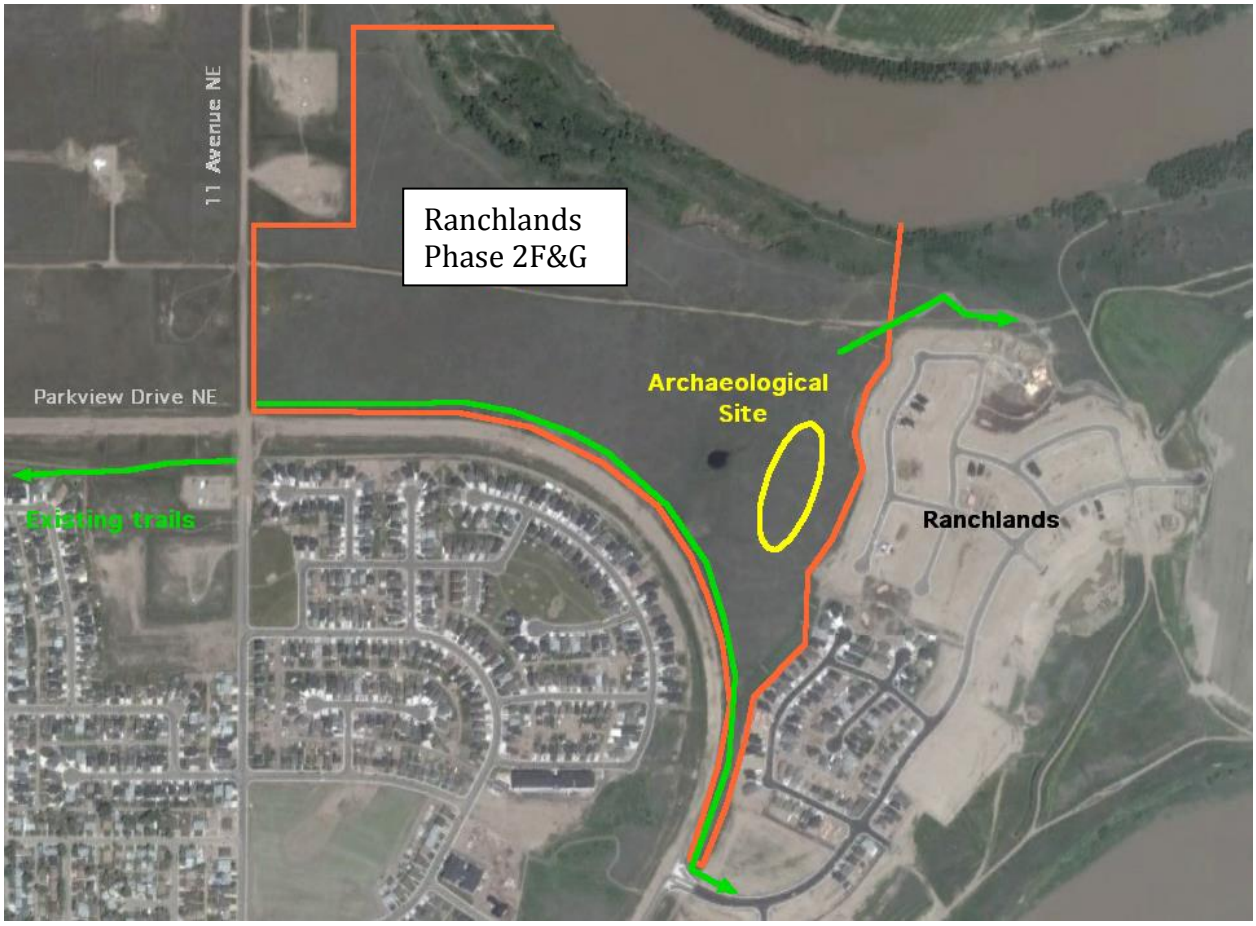
All the walks started by the participants not really knowing what to expect and some not even wanting to be there and by some voicing their annoyance. It had me worried for a moment but then just a few minutes into the walk, the change was very evident. They were visibly more relaxed taking in the sights and sounds of this prairie. And by the end of the walk they were all smiles and wanted to do their part in helping to protect this little slice of heaven within the city limits of Medicine Hat.

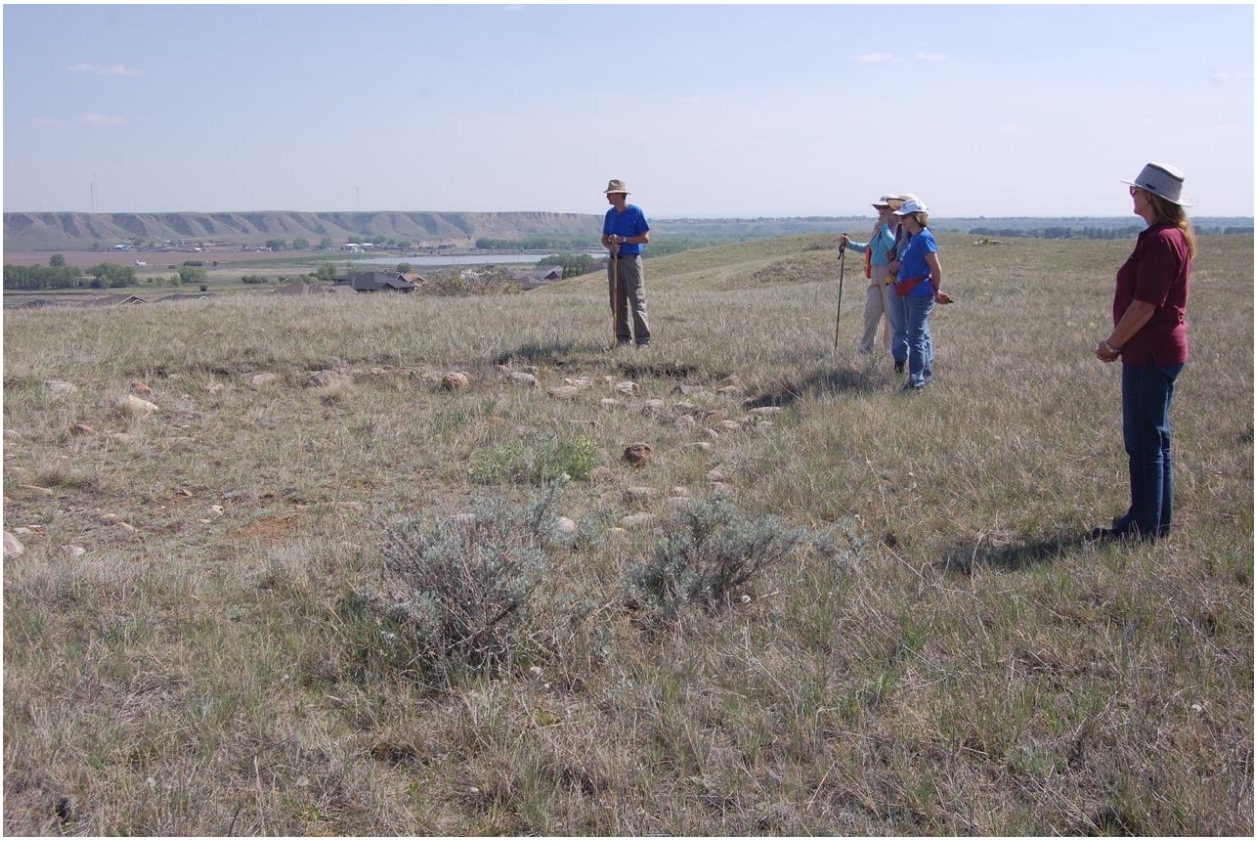
Photos Credit John Slater

I could go on and tell you more about all that this area has to offer but that would be a lot to write and more then what you would probably like to read. Everything has much more meaning to experience in person.

Archeological Significances

The Medicine Hat Archeological Society has conducted various surveys, including some excavations, of the archeological site of the First Nations which occurs on the Ranchlands Preserve. The site consists of teepee rock rings and monuments of rock piles. The site found so far is located on the eastern portion of the property overlooking the steep slopes to Ranchlands Phase 3 and the South Saskatchewan River. Documentation of the excavations is available separately. Audio and video recordings of the interpretive features of the archeological site are being produced.





Pictures Credit Rob Gardner

Invasive Threats

The growing passion for our ecosystem and all that is in it increases the want and need to protect it. One of the many threats an area like this has is invasive species that must be controlled.

In addition to the Super Hero Program mentioned earlier, there were a number of work groups who came to dig, pull and pick the invasive species to help protect that area. The people who participated volunteered their time in trying to remove invasive species such as baby's breath and leafy spurge.

Photo Credit John Slater

Even though there were thousands of invasive plants removed over the summer of 2016, by the end of August there was re growth and you can see how much this is an ongoing problem. Another report is available which details the type of efforts and number of plants removed as well as suggestions of various methods for controlling the invasive species.

Concluding Remarks:

With the Ranchlands Preserve, more needs to be done in order to protect it. But in order to protect it, more people need to enjoy it. My personal suggestion would to allow these guided walks and interpretive programs to continue, because they have informed the public of the existence of the Preserve and what it has to offer, and encouraged people to get out, explore and discover the native prairie and significant archeological sites within our city boundary. Increasing the public awareness seems to be having positive results.

Acknowledgements:

The 2016 Ranchlands 2F&G Project could not have taken place without the dedication, energy and hard work of volunteers such as the Grasslands Naturalists and especially Mr. John Slater who acted as the liaison between the City of Medicine Hat Lands department, and Ms. Corlaine Gardner, supervisor for Brenda Powder at Police Point Park. Special thanks as well to Cathy Linowski, Coordinator of the Medicine Hat College Environmental Reclamation program for providing training, expertise about Tiny Cryptantha and input into the final report. Finally, thank you to the City of Medicine Hat for providing funding to support the Ranchlands 2F&G Project.

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