

## **President's Report to GN AGM**

### **March, 2023**

This past year has seen the Grasslands Naturalists finally escape from the lockdowns and mandates of Covid-19, along with most of the rest of the world. We were finally able to resume indoor program meetings in-person in October 2022. While doing so, for the first time in our society's history, we managed to conduct a hybrid meeting, offering members the opportunity to either meet in-person or online. Going forward, this will probably be a permanent feature of all our indoor programs. Despite covid, our society continued to function throughout the pandemic by meeting through zoom online. No indoor program meetings were missed because of covid. I am indebted to Linda Fisher, Ian and Angela Turner and David Gue, who put in many extra hours, without which we would have had cancelled meetings.

The past year has been filled with some memorable indoor programs and a host of field trips, with at least one outdoor activity being offered each week. Some of our major annual outdoor activities like the May Bird Count and the Christmas Bird Count, experienced high levels of participation and accumulated worthwhile citizen-science data.

This past year has been a significant one for the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program with the renewal of our five year contract with the city permitting us to continue managing the program for another five years. The negotiations did not proceed easily because the city of Medicine Hat's insurance requirements did not necessarily correspond to the coverage being offered by our insurance providers. Many hours of tense negotiations took place as a result and we are all indebted to Paul Thibault and Hugh Armstrong, Operations Committee Chairperson, who handled these difficult negotiations. Thankfully, that matter is now settled for another five years.

Of course the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program also transitioned successfully to a new team of interpreters headed up by Alicia Lew. At last year's annual meeting we recognized the great service of our retiring chief Interpreter, Corlaine Gardner and long-time interpreter Marty Drut. We are all impressed with the fine program of activities that the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program has offered this past year under Alicia's leadership along with a great new team of interpreters.

Our society has been active throughout the past year on the environmental advocacy side, monitoring many issues and becoming actively involved in some; Below is a brief overview of issues in which we participated:

Master Environmental Plan – Myself and Martha Gue held meetings and continued contact with Kevin Redden, Director of the Environment and Government Relations, promoting the importance of our city creating a Master Environmental Plan. Our new City Council has been receptive to that idea so far and work has begun on the creation of an Environmental Framework for our city which is intended to work in tandem with the city's new Strong Towns

initiative. The city has designated Grasslands Naturalists as a key external stakeholder to be consulted during the inauguration of this new Environmental Framework.

Irrigation Upgrades and Expansion - Our society has been linked with a consortium of other environmental groups, including the Lethbridge Naturalists Society monitoring the massive upgrades and expansions taking place in the southern Alberta irrigation districts. Irrigation canals are being converted to underground pipes, reservoirs are being expanded, and over a billion dollars is being spent on these changes. Much of this work has been forging ahead with limited environmental assessment and in some cases none at all that we have been aware of. With the help of the Issues Committee we have sent letters to the appropriate cabinet members and bureaucrats registering our concerns about these oversights. I have just recently received a reply from one of the cabinet ministers.

Sustainable Energy Projects in Southern Alberta – We are all acutely aware that southern Alberta is quickly becoming the nation’s leader in new sustainable energy projects including both huge solar farms and massive wind turbine fields. While we are generally supportive of all sustainable energy projects, at the same time we are strong advocates for the preservation of our remaining and threatened native grasslands. We have been advocating that these new energy projects must be restricted to agricultural land only (preferably marginal agricultural land) and avoid all native grasslands. The industry has been generally following these stipulations with some exceptions. At the same time, we are also becoming aware that these projects are becoming so large and numerous in our part of the world that significant agricultural land is being taken out of food production. This is becoming a new concern to some Albertans.

Invasive Plant Species – Our society, along with SEAWA, have become the leading organizations actually addressing the problem of invasive plant species. While the law requires that provinces actually do something to control and eliminate invasive species, in the Medicine Hat area, our two organizations have been most active. In the past, through our efforts, we have virtually eliminated invasive Baby’s Breath and this past year a vigorous effort has been mounted against Buckthorn at Police Point Park. Led by John Slater and Gerry Ehlert along with support from the city of Medicine Hat, this invasive species will soon be gone from everyone’s favorite park. Russian Olive is another huge invasive species which our members and SEAWA’s members are now in dialogue with the City of Medicine Hat on how to address this matter. This is probably the largest invasives plant species issue in our area.

Scenic Views Project – While, technically not an environmental issue, this past year we have come close to completing this large project, which focuses on the many environmentally sensitive areas within our city limits. This project is being done in cooperation with the city of Medicine Hat and will create new awareness of beautiful natural urban areas that are deserving of appreciation and protection. Studies have shown that the more people are aware of these type of sensitive natural spaces, the more likely they will come under protection, especially as new development starts to encroach upon them. With the trends that are likely to change development strategies in our city under the Strong Towns program, the importance of these Scenic Views areas may develop a new significance as areas to be protected. I sometimes think that “Scenic Views” name does not do justice to this project, because it is about much more than just views. It is about environmentally sensitive areas that we need to come to know,

appreciate and protect. Our society has put a lot of work, effort and money into this project and we look forward to its completion in 2023.

Bird Friendly City – This is a new effort undertaken by our society. It comes to us from our Parent organization, Nature Canada. It is a national program that encourages urban areas to become bird friendly by meeting a long list of criteria. Many cities in Canada have already gained this certification. We have approached the City of Medicine Hat to undertake this project in conjunction with the Grasslands Naturalists. They have indicated to us that they are willing to enter into this effort upon completion of their Environmental Framework which is scheduled to be done by the end of 2023. We envision launching this program by conducting a contest to name Medicine Hat's city bird sometime in early 2024. A Bird Friendly City committee has been formed and planning is underway.

While, the above are some of the environmental matters that have been our main priorities in the past year, it is only a partial list. There are many issues that we have been unable to address because of a lack of volunteers. This is a matter facing all non-profit NGO organizations in 2023. Our democratic societies seem to be losing the spirit of volunteerism. We attempted to address this issue in the fall by holding a recruiting event among Medicine Hat College students in the hopes of gaining new young members. Eleven students and two faculty members attended our presentation. Six of them became members but so far only one has attended a GN event. Our overall society membership is a little over 100 and seems to be holding more or less steady. However, our age demographic is concerning. We could be doing much more as a society if only we had more committed volunteers.

Financially, our society has remained strong throughout the year, as you will see in our separate financial reports. We appreciate the work of our excellent Treasurer, Angela Turner. Our membership fees have not been increased for many years. Fortunately, the Casino funding has been our major source of income along with grants directed to specific areas. Without casino funding we would be hard-pressed to meet all our financial obligations, especially our largest annual cost, General Liability Insurance as well as Directors and Officers Liability Insurance. We are indebted to volunteer Bruce McLeod who agreed to manage our casino participation this past year. Of course our largest financial responsibility is the operation of the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program which includes funding from the City of Medicine Hat and relies on matching grants which need to be raised by the Interpretive Program.

I close my report by talking about our valued volunteers. Without them, there would be no Grasslands Naturalists Society. Our Chronicle Editor, Milt Spitzer, plays a vital role of providing necessary communication through our monthly newsletter. Tina Regehr looks after and maintains our Facebook page; Board member Corlaine Gardner has assumed the vital role of Communications Chairperson; Paul Thibault serves as Budget Chair, Governance Chair and creates and maintains our website; The Board of Directors that I work with has been magnificent. Each has played a vital role. Hugh Armstrong, our Past President has chaired the Interpretive Program Operations Committee, which is a big, big responsibility. Our interim Vice-President, Martha Munz-Gue, is one of our busiest members and keeps me informed and connected to half of Medicine Hat; Martha Maudsley, our secretary, faithfully documents our

meetings and helps build our agendas in spite of her busy work schedule; Linda Fisher is responsible for all these wonderful indoor program guest speakers that we all enjoy so much; Ian Turner brings a great mind and point of view to our board meetings that always makes our meeting decisions better with his input; and above and beyond our board, people like Gerry Ehlert, John Slater, David Gue, and Paul Thibault have played vital roles without which our society would not be what it is. Suffice it to say, that it is the great quality of the people who make up our membership that makes our society so special.

Some of those great people are no longer with us. Over the years I have worked with Carol Porter, Veronica Swan, Dawn Dickinson, Mike O Shea, Dennis Baresco, Ben Velner, and Eileen Cowtan to just name a few. There are many more. Those names and others have contributed to the great heritage that our society has built over that last 30 plus years.

However, in order to carry on that heritage, we need new people to step forward into leadership positions. My own involvement is tenuous because of several health issues. My body needs surgeries that I have been delaying. It's time that others fill the gap. Our city needs the Grasslands Naturalists Society. Southeastern Alberta needs it. We are one of the few voices for natural protection and teaching in our part of the world. Who will become leader of that voice?

Submitted by  
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President