

# **President's Report to the Annual General Meeting of the Grasslands Naturalists Society**

**Tuesday, March 26, 2024**

An Annual General Meeting for a non-profit society such as ours is a time to reflect on past accomplishments and to evaluate and plan for the challenges presented by the future. For myself it is also a time of transition as I retire from the position of president and settle into the cushy role of past president! I look forward to handing the reins over to our new president and giving that person my full support and best wishes.

We are living in critical times when it comes to the environment. Our Grasslands Naturalists Society is one of the few NGO's in Southeastern Alberta whose mandate covers every aspect of our natural environments and at times the scale of our responsibility seems overwhelming given the small size of our society. Climate change and its accompanying water shortages, drought, damaging weather events, and dramatic new stresses on our ecosystems serve as a backdrop to all the environmental issues we currently face. Nonetheless, our small club punches far above its weight and our voice reaches the ears of governments, the media, and the population at large.

In this past year one of our major club accomplishments came to fruition in the form of the Scenic Views project. Far beyond just highlighting viewpoints, this project identifies important ecosystems within our city limits that are worthy of attention and protection. A hard-working committee led by Gerry Ehlert has spent the past four years researching, writing and photographing these special places and compiling it into an impressive online brochure as well as actual signage at each site. All of this was done with the complete collaboration of the City of Medicine Hat.

Along that same vein we can report that the City of Medicine Hat is in the process of adopting the much sought after Environmental Framework, something that our club has been advocating for, for many years. We have been actively involved as Key External Stakeholders in this endeavor and have provided the city with extensive input during the past two years. Final adoption of this framework is expected later this year.

Other major accomplishments in the past year have been the continuation and growth of the Adopt-A-Pond initiative under the supervision of Martha Munz Gue and in cooperation with our sister club SEAWA. This endeavor has taken on a life of its own and volunteers from every walk of life in our city have come together to care for our beloved riparian areas and pathways. Invasive species have been another area of focus in the past year in the form of public education and active plant removal in the field with the likes of Gerry Ehlert, John Slater, Martha Gue and Cathy Linowski.

In this coming year two major issues are gaining importance and our society is gearing up to address them. One is the massive expansion of irrigation projects in southern Alberta which has already dramatically impacted southwestern Alberta and is now actively expanding into southeastern Alberta with projects in the Acadia region, Murray Lake, local canals and possible new reservoirs as yet to be determined. There are individuals lobbying hard to resurrect the

Meridian Dam which we successfully opposed many years ago. One of our major concerns is that impacts on native grassland and our river valley be minimized as these projects progress. We are now in close contact with members of the Lethbridge area naturalists who are already actively involved in monitoring these irrigation projects.

The other area becoming increasingly important to our environment is the proliferation of Green Energy Projects in southeastern Alberta in the form of wind turbines and solar farms. Here again, our stance has been to protect native grasslands from these projects and also to minimize impacts on vulnerable bird and other animal populations. Our provincial government has also become heavily involved in regulating these projects.

A major concern that weighs heavily on our small society is that these environmental issues are often beyond our manpower and time demands. We need much more help on our Issues Committee and we are lacking an overall Issues Committee Chairperson at this time which is a major hole in our organizational structure. We could be doing much more on this front if we had a few more volunteers.

Of course, our society is involved in much more than just environmental issues. In the past year we have enjoyed an indoor program of excellent guest speakers on a wide variety of natural history topics, thanks to our amazing Indoor Program Chairperson Linda Fisher. And thanks to the great skills of Ian Turner and David Gue we have been able to conduct these program events as hybrid meetings on zoom.

The past year has offered a program of varied field trips in the form of birding walks, wildflower hunts, neighborhood walks and others. However, it is becoming a concern that our field trip leaders are advancing in age and there is a need for new younger field trip leaders. Feel free to volunteer.

Under the leadership of Governance Committee Chair and Vice-President Paul Thibault, our board of directors undertook a series of Strategic Planning meetings out of which came some changes to the format of our indoor programs, a decision to add two more at-large board members effective this coming year, and a decision to join the Chamber of Commerce to give our club a higher profile in the community and to give us access to a large board room for meetings. This latter decision makes it possible for our general membership to be able to attend board meetings as guests because this board room provides the necessary space. Another outcome of the strategic meetings was the decision to gain more input and direction from you our members. We did this by conducting the recent Pizza Parlay event and also by conducting an online membership survey. Your input is helping us to plan.

In many ways the Grasslands Naturalists Society is a strong organization. Our overall membership is close to 200, possibly the highest it's ever been. Financially our club is strong, in large part because of Casino funding which is made possible because of the involvement of you, our members under the direction of Bruce Mcleod, our casino manager. Of course one of the great strengths of the Grasslands Naturalists is the management of the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program in partnership with the City of Medicine Hat. Through the hard work of our staff under the leadership of Chief Interpreter Alicia Lew, thousands of Medicine Hatters become more educated and aware of southeastern Alberta incredible natural history. The existence of the interpretive program plays a huge role in carrying out the vision and mandate of our society.

As I finish my term as your President I am beholden to the great people I have been working with all year on our Board of Directors and various committees. This past year I would not have been able to carry on as President without the help of Paul Thibault, Vice-President. He has devoted unimaginable hours to supporting my role as President. Martha Maudsley as Secretary and Angela Turner as Treasurer and Hugh Armstrong as Past President have rounded out our executive and made my position worry-free. Our at-large board members have all brought great skills and strength to our board. These include Ian Turner, Linda Fisher, and Sheila McLeod. However, others such as Corlaine Gardner, and Martha Munz-Gue attended most meetings in an unofficial capacity and carried major workloads. There are countless volunteers among our members that have made a major difference in the past year. Some of these include Gerry Ehlert, David Gue. Rob Gardner, John Slater, Bruce McLeod, Milt Spitzer, Bob Townsend, and the list can go on. I'm sorry, I'm sure I have missed a few. You are all important.

In summation the effectiveness of our society is made possible through the collective activity of a committed membership. This means that the more active and the more committed our membership becomes, the more effective our voice and programs become. The great need we are faced with in the next few future years is the need to generate new members from younger demographics. Some attempts we tried to do in the past couple years has been met with mixed or little success. As I pass on my role as President to another, that is one of the biggest challenges our society faces. We need our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren to join our cause. The well-being of future life on our planet is closely tied to the health of nature. In a planet that is now under stress at every turn, those of us who are close to nature have answers that can serve our planet well and give hope for the future. We know many strategies for living that can alleviate the pressures our planet is facing. We need to pass that on to the younger generation and let them pick up the torch going forward. That is the great challenge facing the Grasslands Naturalists Society today. I urge you to help the board with new ideas and plans to enlarge our society's membership and vision.

**Submitted by**  
**Phil Horch,**  
**President, Grasslands Naturalists Society**