



Wild MANITOBA



5 NATURAL TREASURES AT RISK

PRESERVING MANITOBA'S WILDERNESS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS



Eric Reder
Manitoba Campaign Director

When I was out on the Bird River one afternoon, a furry head popped above the water and peered at our approaching canoe. In a moment, another head broke the surface, and a pair of curious river otters watched us paddle past. Memories like this remind me how fortunate I am to be able to experience wild Manitoba – and they're memories that many of us in the province share.

It is easy for Manitobans to take for granted that the lakes and rivers of the boreal – the destinations of our summer weekend excursions – will always be there. But the reality is that even with vast sections of the province's wild lands and waters in public hands, **development is eating away at wilderness, harming our wildlife, our fresh water and our forests.**

In 2009, the Wilderness Committee launched our first *Conservation Hotspots* paper, and listed five key

areas the Manitoba government needed to preserve¹ (you can read about the current state of these areas on the back of this publication).

Maintaining healthy intact areas protects biodiversity – the variety of life and natural processes that occur in the wild. **All this contributes to healthy ecosystems and a healthier Manitoba.**

In a functioning ecosystem, there are many naturally occurring processes that help make a healthy environment for us. These processes are known as "ecosystem services." Manitobans benefit from a variety of ecosystem services, including pollination, erosion prevention, weather stabilization and protection against climate change. Lowland peat bogs absorb carbon and filter freshwater, and forests pull carbon dioxide and pollutants out of the air while releasing oxygen – which helps maintain a stable climate.

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in April 2014, warns of grave consequences if we wait any longer to take action to reduce climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions. It also says activities that limit

forest degradation are cost-effective options for tackling the climate crisis.² This is just one more reason why protecting more of Manitoba's forests is in everyone's best interest.

Unfortunately, the Canadian government has been slow to respond to dire climate warnings; instead it has drastically weakened a number of environmental laws. In 2012, federal policy-makers began a

disturbing dismantling of protection for water, starting with the gutting of the *Fisheries Act* and the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*.

The next five hotspots we've chosen as priorities for protection encompass waterways that are at risk. With the loss of federal protection for these and other rivers and lakes across the province, new provincial legislation is essential in order to protect waterways in Manitoba.

The Wilderness Committee is advocating for 20 per cent of Manitoba to be protected by the year 2020. So far, just over 10 per cent of the province has been protected. A healthy future depends on preserving Manitoba's natural heritage, and to reach our goal, we'll have to work together.

OUR TARGET:
To see 20% of Manitoba protected by the year 2020.



Photo top: Sunrise in Duck Mountain Provincial Park, **above:** Moose (Mike Grandmaison).

Read on to find out more about the key areas we've selected in Manitoba, where protection is urgently needed to safeguard forests, local wildlife, community health and a stable climate.



Photo: Boreal oak (Eric Reder).

1 LOWER BIRD RIVER

PROPOSED PROTECTED AREA

For more than a hundred kilometres, the Bird River flows through protected lands – from its origins in Ontario’s Woodland Caribou Provincial Park toward the Winnipeg River. Valued as a remote yet accessible wilderness river, every year the Bird River introduces thousands of people to the joys of canoeing in the Boreal Shield. For nearly its entire length, the banks of the Bird River are protected from development.

The lower Bird River, as it flows into Lac du Bonnet and the Winnipeg River, is teeming with cottage activity. Studies have shown that the the lower Bird River is so popular that the river has reached its ecological carrying capacity, and that diminishing wildlife, fish stocks and water quality are all on the horizon.³

Between Nopiming Park and the lower rapids, the Bird River meanders for 17 kilometres. A decade ago this stretch of river was the central feature in a fight over logging, as timber

corporation Tembec had plans to raze the forest along the river. Local intervention stopped this plan.

Now, a new threat has emerged. Cabot Corporation, which operates the nearby TANCO tantalum mine, wants to drain part of Bernic Lake – a lake already facing water quality impacts since the mine has been in operation – into the Bird River.⁴

The Wilderness Committee is proposing to safeguard the lower stretch of the river that remains unprotected, with additional protection covering at least 1.5 kilometres on either side of the waterway. Protecting the Bird River by establishing this new freshwater protected area, in addition to new provincial water protection legislation, will help preserve the quality of life and recreational experiences on the Bird River. It will also help contribute to healthier water in the Winnipeg River and in Lake Winnipeg.



Photo left: Lower Bird River, right: Red fox (Eric Reeder).

2 RED DEER LAKE

PROPOSED WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

The proposed Red Deer Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is a wonderfully wild piece of Manitoba’s natural heritage. Situated on the western edge of Manitoba between the Saskatchewan River Delta and the Porcupine Hills, the area is a combination of forested ridges and extensive lowlands entwined in winding rivers.

The Manitoba government has already identified this area for future protection, but the Wilderness Committee hopes to see much more land incorporated into the plan. The area we’re proposing stretches nearly 80 kilometres in length, and covers an area bigger than Duck Mountain Provincial Park!

Providing a home for endangered species like woodland caribou and the piping plover, these mostly undisturbed and intact ecosystems are important additions to Manitoba’s protected areas.⁵ There has been very little invasive development in this area over the years, which has so far allowed the rivers and waters to remain healthy. Unfortunately, **coal mining, diamond mining, and oil shale mining proposals have all been recently explored for this region**, with many mining exploration companies staking claims. Mining

operations in these wetlands would seriously compromise the health of the region.

There are many problems with mining coal in Manitoba. Accessing the coal deposit located next to the Red Deer WMA would require strip mining – an extraction method that destroys landscapes, forests and wildlife habitat by stripping away plants, soil and trees from the mining area. In addition, strip mining poses serious risks to water, such as chemical contamination of both surface and groundwater.⁶ These coal deposits are all just a short distance upstream of the Red Deer WMA and Manitoba’s large lakes.

Furthermore, the eventual burning of this coal will have an even more harmful impact on our planet by contributing to climate change.

Preserving the Red Deer Lake area will safeguard its tremendous natural values while ensuring that freshwater is filtered through the wetlands to supply Manitoba’s great lakes.⁷



Photo: Duck Mountain Provincial Park (Mike Grandmaison).

3 DUCK MOUNTAIN

PROVINCIAL PARK LOGGING BAN

Rolling rugged hills and pristine lakes make up the Duck Mountains region of western Manitoba. Moose meander through the mixed aspen and evergreen forests, and trout can be found in the clear waters. Duck Mountain Provincial Park is one of Manitoba’s first provincial parks – a testament to the special place the Ducks have in the hearts of Manitobans.

Duck Mountain Provincial Park also has the shameful distinction of being the last park in Manitoba that still allows logging. In fact,

along with Algonquin Park in Ontario, it is one of only two parks in Canada that still allow logging. The Manitoba government banned timber harvesting in all parks – except Duck Mountain – in 2009.⁸ The federal government ended logging in national parks back in 1992.

During the battle to end logging in parks in 2008, Manitoba’s Conservation Minister was presented

with the fact that at least eight out of ten people thought logging needed to be banned in provincial parks. The Minister replied that he thought the number of people who wanted logging out of parks was probably even higher. Unfortunately, the Manitoba government has just instilled logging in the Ducks until 2019 by quietly giving timber company Louisiana-Pacific Corp. an unprecedented six-year extension on its existing environmental licence.⁹

There is a clear path forward for Manitobans and for Duck Mountain Provincial Park, and that is to enact new legislation that ends logging in Duck Mountain Park once and for all. It’s time for logging interests to adjust their business models and operate elsewhere, so Manitobans will get the real park protection they expect and deserve.



Photo: Ferns, MB (Mike Grandmaison).

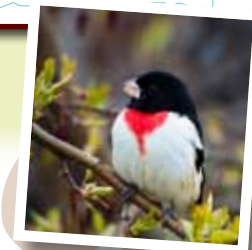
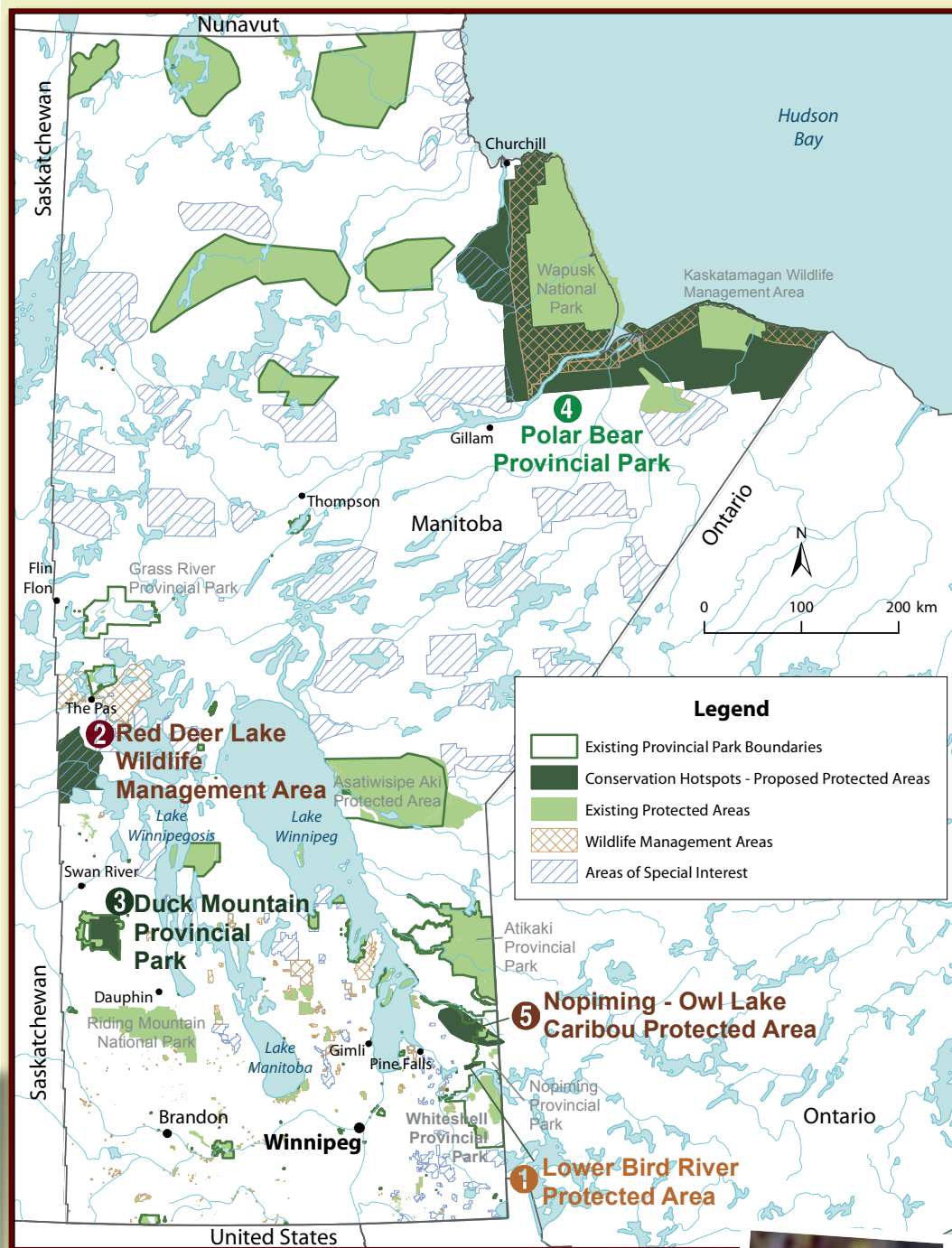


Photo: Rose-breasted grosbeak (Mike Grandmaison).

4 POLAR BEAR PROPOSED PROVINCIAL PARK

Manitobans don't always think of polar bears and beluga whales when they think of their province. But for visitors from around the world, polar bears and belugas are major attractions in Manitoba's north. Churchill is the pre-eminent place for tourists to watch belugas and bears, and take in the tundra and subarctic conditions.

The shores of Hudson Bay are home to one of the greatest concentrations of polar bears in the world. Polar bears rely on sea ice to catch seals – which make up the bulk of their diet – but now because of climate change, the shrinking sea ice is putting pressure on these majestic bears. Any added stressors while the bears are on shore in summer will contribute to an already slimming population.

Right now, Manitoba's polar bears – and ecological tourism in Churchill – are facing a crude threat. Omnitrax, the company that owns the rail line to Churchill as well as the seaport, is planning to ship rail cars of crude oil up unstable tracks through polar bear habitat, and then by tanker through beluga whale habitat. The Manitoba government has stated that it doesn't support this plan, but the licensing for railways carrying oil and

fuels in Canada is in federal jurisdiction.

The Manitoba government is working on two major initiatives for the north, designed to preserve the habitat of belugas and polar bears. One of these involves the creation of a Polar Bear Provincial Park encompassing the



Photo: Polar bear family near Churchill, MB (Mike Grandmaison).

whole Hudson Bay coastal region from Churchill right through to Ontario¹⁰, and the other involves a marine protected area in beluga habitat.¹¹ Hard work will be required to ensure these initiatives succeed.

First Nations in the north still rely on Hudson Bay and its surrounding lands and waters, and the province's protection initiatives overlap many traditional territories. Responsible, meaningful consultation and accommodation will need to be completed with the First Nations.

Done right, the new protection initiatives for beluga and polar bear habitat could put a stop to the shaky oil-by-rail plan. Banning the movement of trains carrying crude oil through these protected lands and waters will keep control of these lands and waters within

Manitoba. Protecting these areas will also help combat climate change by reducing ground disturbances in the Hudson Bay Lowlands – an area rich in peat, which helps to offset climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions by sequestering large amounts of carbon.



Photos above: Snowshoe hare (Robert McCaw), Caribou tracks (Eric Reder).

5 NOPIMING – OWL LAKE PROPOSED CARIBOU PROTECTED AREA

Most Manitobans will never see a woodland caribou in the wild, yet this iconic creature occupies a very special place in the history of this land. Known as the "grey ghosts of the forest," woodland caribou roam in small groups through lowland bogs, rocky jackpine ridges and aging groves throughout the boreal. They are elusive and very sensitive to human activity.

According to the federal recovery strategy for woodland caribou, these animals may move up to 60 kilometres away to escape a disturbance in their home range. And as more boreal habitat is lost to development, these disturbances are becoming increasingly prevalent. Many caribou ranges across Canada are facing quickly declining populations and predicted local extinction. As a result, woodland caribou are afforded protection under the federal *Species At Risk Act* as well as the Manitoba *Endangered Species Act*.



Photos above: Woodland caribou (Mike Grandmaison), Black River (Eric Reder).

In northern Nopiming Provincial Park, just south of the Manigotagan River Provincial Park, a caribou population known as the Owl-Flintstone Range has persisted. Well-studied over the past few decades, this band of caribou has remained near stable. In 2011, the Manitoba government released a draft action plan for the Owl-Flintstone caribou, and recommended a new protected area for caribou.¹²

Nearly three years later, however, there is silence from the government on this necessary action. In addition, there is word that new logging licences

could be issued for the region. **More industrial activity cannot be allowed until a new protected area is established for the Owl-Flintstone woodland caribou.**

WATER PROTECTION LEGISLATION NEEDED

Water isn't just the most precious resource – water is life. Manitoba is fortunate to have more freshwater than most jurisdictions around the world, including thousands of rivers, lakes, creeks and wetlands. Unfortunately, there is very little protection afforded to our valuable water bodies.

Until 2012, federal legislation provided protection for waterways. But with the gutting of the *Fisheries Act*, the curtailing of the *Navigable Waters Protection Act* and the weakening of the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*, the federal government sent a clear message that it will no longer protect water from devastation and exploitation by industry.

The provincial government now has an opportunity and a responsibility to build a water law that protects our waterways. Right now there is a hodgepodge of legislation that covers water, including an existing *Water Protection Act* that is merely a guideline with no requirement for real action to protect water. There is no comprehensive and clear management system for the protection of this resource.

There are currently NO marine or inland water protected areas in Manitoba.¹³ Both Poplar River First Nation and Fisher River Cree Nation recently protected their territory, and designated their traditional use areas on Lake Winnipeg as "protected," yet there is no provincial regulation that actually protects the water.

In 2011, after extensive public consultation, a wetlands consultation document was released by the Manitoba Water Council, which specifically recommended a provincial Wetlands Policy.¹⁴ However, no policy has been forthcoming.

Manitoba needs marine and inland water protected areas. These new protected areas could also help save two of the hotspots mentioned above from industrial damage. Making the lower Bird River a protected waterway would keep Cabot Corp. from damaging Bernic Creek and the Bird River by draining Bernic Lake for its TANCO mine. In the north, making the mouth of the Churchill River a marine protected area that bans crude oil shipments would put an end to Omnitrax's irresponsible plan to ship crude oil through the port of Churchill.



Photo left: Horned grebe (Rebecca and Glen Grambo) right: Canada violet (Mike Grandmaison).

WILDERNESS CONSERVATION IN MANITOBA: AN ONGOING EFFORT

For more than two decades, Manitoba's government has been promising protection for more of the province's wild lands. In 1990, the Manitoba government agreed to protect at least 12 per cent of the province from development by the year 2000, but right now, just 10 per cent of the province is protected.¹⁵

Large sections of Hecla / Grindstone Provincial Park and Whiteshell Provincial Park have recently been protected from industrial development, in large part due to the outcry of Wilderness Committee supporters.

Just as there is progress, though, there are also setbacks. The proposed Springer Lake Ecological Reserve, inside Nopiming Provincial Park, was again the site of mineral exploration work, with roads bulldozed in it in the spring of 2011.

A look at the Manitoba government's protected areas website in April 2014 finds a new Biodiversity

Conservation Area (BCA) in the works for Langford Community Pasture region,¹⁶ and yet there is no such thing as a BCA in our protected areas legislation. The public has not been very well informed about this proposal by the government – another recurring problem with protected areas work.

There are still over 100 areas being considered for protection right now,¹⁷ including four million hectares already supported for protection by the mining industry.¹⁸ Protecting

20 per cent of the province from industrial development by 2020 is an achievable goal, but getting there will require timelines, resources and political will. **By raising awareness about the benefits of protecting nature and reaching out to decision-makers for support, we can ensure that this vision for a healthy and wild Manitoba becomes a reality.**



Photo: Mining exploration in Manitoba's boreal region (Eric Reder).

ORIGINAL CONSERVATION HOTSPOTS: FIVE YEARS LATER...

In our original *Conservation Hotspots* educational report – published in 2009 – we introduced five regions of Manitoba that needed protection: the Saskatchewan River Delta, the Whitemouth River Area, the Chitek Lake Park Reserve, the Fish Lake Area, and the Gardenton and Pansy Pastures. Since then, over 6,000 letters have been delivered to the Manitoba government asking for these five areas to be protected.

Four out of the five have taken significant strides towards protection, thanks to support from people like you. Much of the Saskatchewan River Delta remains temporarily off-limits to logging, as protected status is still

being considered. But as usual in conservation work, the process is secretive and the progress is slow. The Chitek Lake Park Reserve has interim protection until September 2014,¹⁹ and it remains to be seen when the government will initiate work towards full permanent protection of the area.

There was progress on the Whitemouth River area in 2013, as Whiteshell Provincial Park was expanded to include the Whitemouth River Area and connect the Whitemouth Bog Ecological Reserve and the nearby Wildlife Management Area.²⁰

In 2013, control of Gardenton and Pansy Pastures – previously the jurisdiction of the federal government – was transferred to the provincial government. This sets the stage for Manitoba to designate more of this rare prairie into protected lands.



Photo left: Great grey owl, right: Fringed gentian (Mike Grandmaison).

TAKE ACTION!

Your voice is needed to help gain protection for these five natural treasures before they're damaged by further industrial development. **The time to act is now!**

Please write to the Premier of Manitoba, and let him know how much you support efforts to protect the province's wilderness. Urge the provincial government to fully protect these five threatened wilderness areas: the lower Bird River, Red Deer Lake, Duck Mountain Provincial Park, Churchill and Hudson Bay polar bear habitat and Nopiming – Owl Lake caribou habitat.

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Photo: Inukshuk, Hudson Bay (Mike Grandmaison).

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The Wilderness Committee is Canada's largest membership-based wilderness preservation organization.

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